



A GUIDE TO THE BOOK OF ABRAHAM

STEPHEN O. SMOOT, JOHN GEE,
KERRY MUHLESTEIN, AND JOHN S. THOMPSON

Scholarship informed by
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Jesus Christ



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A Guide to the Book of Abraham

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John S. Thompson



SCHOLARSHIP INFORMED
BY THE RESTORED GOSPEL
OF JESUS CHRIST

5 Introduction

THE COMING FORTH OF THE BOOK OF ABRAHAM

- 13 What Egyptian Papyri Did Joseph Smith Possess?
- 29 How Did Joseph Smith Translate the Book of Abraham?
- 45 The “Kirtland Egyptian Papers” and the Book of Abraham
- 50 The Relationship between the Book of Abraham and the Joseph Smith Papyri
- 56 The Priesthood Ban and the Book of Abraham

THE BOOK OF ABRAHAM IN THE ANCIENT WORLD

- 67 Ur of the Chaldees
- 71 Abraham and Idrimi
- 76 Human Sacrifice
- 80 The Idolatrous God Elkenah
- 83 Sobek, the God of Pharaoh
- 88 The Plain of Olishem
- 92 Potiphar’s Hill
- 98 The Blood of the Canaanites
- 101 Zeptah and Egyptes
- 107 The Name of the Lord
- 113 Abraham’s Converts in Haran
- 117 The Plains of Moreh
- 121 The Abrahamic Covenant

- 125 Did Abraham Lie about His Wife, Sarai?
129 Abraham the Seer
135 Abrahamic Astronomy
138 Shinehah, the Sun
142 Kolob, the Governing One
150 The Divine Council
155 The Foreordination of Abraham
159 The Son of Man
163 The Fall of Lucifer
168 Creation from Chaos
172 Ancient Near Eastern Creation Myths
175 By His Own Hand upon Papyrus
181 Chiasmus in the Book of Abraham
185 Egyptianisms in the Book of Abraham
189 Jews in Ancient Egypt
193 Abrahamic Legends and Lore
197 The Ancient Egyptian View of Abraham
201 The Ancient Owners of the Joseph Smith Papyri

THE FACSIMILES OF THE BOOK OF ABRAHAM

- 209 Approaching the Facsimiles
215 A Semitic View of the Facsimiles
221 Facsimile 1 as a Sacrifice Scene
227 The Idolatrous Priest (Facsimile 1, Figure 3)
234 The Purpose and Function of the Egyptian Hypocephalus
247 One Day to a Cubit (Facsimile 2, Figure 1)
251 The Hathor Cow (Facsimile 2, Figure 5)
255 The Four Sons of Horus (Facsimile 2, Figure 6)

- 259** God Sitting upon His Throne (Facsimile 2, Figure 7)
- 264** Facsimile 3: Judgment Scene or Presentation Scene?
- 270** Abraham and Osiris (Facsimile 3, Figure 1)
- 276** Isis the Pharaoh (Facsimile 3, Figure 2)
- 280** Shulem, One of the King's Principal Waiters
(Facsimile 3, Figure 5)
- 283** Conclusion
- 285** Appendix: Book of Abraham Bibliography
- 301** About the Authors

Introduction

Stephen O. Smoot, John Gee, Kerry Muhlestein, and John S. Thompson

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.

Part 1

The Coming Forth of the Book of Abraham

What Egyptian Papyri Did Joseph Smith Possess?

In early July 1835, Joseph Smith acquired some Egyptian papyri from which he claimed to translate the Book of Abraham.¹ From historical evidence and the papyrus fragments that were returned to The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in November 1967,² we can piece together a profile of what papyri the Prophet is known to have possessed.

The Book of Breathings of Hor (P. Joseph Smith I, X–XI)³

One of the texts that came into Joseph Smith's ownership was a copy of what is known today as the Book of Breathings—what the ancient Egyptians called the *šꜣyt n snsn*, translated variously as the “Document of Breathing” or “Letter of Fellowship.”⁴ The purpose of this text, which the Egyptians attributed to the goddess Isis (and so was called, in full, “The

1. “History, 1838–1856, Volume B-1 [1 September 1834–2 November 1838],” 595–96, Joseph Smith Papers, accessed December 13, 2022, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/history-1838-1856-volume-b-1-1-september-1834-2-november-1838/49>; “The Book of Abraham,” *Times and Seasons* 3, no. 9 (March 1, 1842): 704.

2. Jay M. Todd, “Egyptian Papyri Rediscovered,” *Improvement Era* 71, no. 1 (January 1968): 12–16.

3. The numbering for the papyri used in this article follows the numbering used in Jay M. Todd, “New Light on Joseph Smith's Egyptian Papyri,” *Improvement Era* 71, no. 2 (February 1968): 40–49. The papyri can also be viewed online at “Introduction to Egyptian Papyri, circa 300–100 BC,” Joseph Smith Papers, accessed December 13, 2022, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/introduction-to-egyptian-papyri-circa-300-100-bc/1>.

4. For different arguments on the best translation of the title, see John Gee, “A New Look at the *nh pꜣ* by Formula,” in *Actes du IXe congrès international des études démotiques, Paris, 31 août–3 septembre 2005*, ed. Ghislaine Widmer and Didier Devauchelle (Paris: Institut Français D'Archéologie Orientale, 2009), 136–38; and Foy D. Scalf, “Passports to Eternity: Formulaic Demotic Funerary Texts and the Final Phase of Egyptian Funerary Literature in Roman Egypt” (PhD diss., University of Chicago, 2014), 19–26.

Document of Breathing Made by Isis for Her Brother Osiris”; *šꜣyt n snsn ir=n ʿIst n sn=s Wsir*), “was to provide the deceased with the essential information needed to be resurrected from the dead and attain eternal life with the gods in the hereafter.”⁵ Indeed, as the text itself explicitly says, its purpose was to cause the deceased’s “soul to live, to cause his body to live, to rejuvenate all his limbs . . . again, [so that he might join] the horizon with his father, Re, [to cause his soul to appear in heaven as the disk of the moon, so that his body might shine like Orion in the womb of Nut].”⁶

Today there are thirty-two known surviving copies of the Book of Breathings Made by Isis.⁷ “While all extant copies of the . . . Document of Breathing are very similar, no two are exactly identical.”⁸ The known copies belonged almost exclusively to members of families of the priesthood of Amun-Re at the Karnak Temple in Thebes, “which suggests the text might be particularly associated with that office.”⁹ The copy of this text that Joseph Smith owned belonged anciently to an Egyptian priest named Hor (*Hr*) or Horos (in Greek) and is quite probably the oldest known copy (dating to ca. 200 BC).¹⁰ Thanks to the work of Egyptologists since the rediscovery of the Joseph Smith Papyri, we know quite a bit about Hor and his occupation as a priest that has direct bearing on the Book of Abraham.¹¹

The Book of the Dead of Tshemmin (P. Joseph Smith II–IX)

Another papyrus scroll that came into Joseph Smith’s possession was a text owned anciently by a woman named Tshemmin (or Ta-Sherit-Min;

5. Michael D. Rhodes, *The Hor Book of Breathings: A Translation and Commentary* (Provo, Utah: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, Brigham Young University, 2002), 14.

6. Rhodes, *The Hor Book of Breathings*, 28, brackets in original; see also Mark Smith, *Traversing Eternity: Texts for the Afterlife from Ptolemaic and Roman Egypt* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 462–78.

7. Marc Coenen, “Owners of the Document of Breathings Made by Isis,” *Chronique D’Égypte* 79, no. 157–58 (2004): 61.

8. Marc Coenen, “The Ownership and Dating of Certain Joseph Smith Papyri,” in Robert K. Ritner, *The Joseph Smith Egyptian Papyri: A Complete Edition, P. JS 1–4 and the Hypocephalus of Sheshonq* (Salt Lake City: Smith–Pettit Foundation, 2011), 58.

9. John Gee, “Book of Breathings,” in *The Pearl of Great Price Reference Companion*, ed. Dennis L. Largey (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2017), 69.

10. Marc Coenen, “The Dating of the Papyrus Joseph Smith I, X, and XI and Min Who Massacres His Enemies,” in *Egyptian Religion: The Last Thousand Years, Part II: Studies Dedicated to the Memory of Jan Quaegebeur*, ed. Willy Clarysse, Antoon Schoors, and Harco Willems (Leuven: Uitgeverij Peeters en Department Oosterse Studies, 1998), 1103–15; Rhodes, *The Hor Book of Breathings*, 3.

11. See “The Ancient Owners of the Joseph Smith Papyri,” 201–5 herein.

t3-šrit-[nt]-Mnw) or Semminis (her Greek name).¹² “Semminis’s scroll contained a Book of the Dead. Originally a very long scroll, it was greatly reduced, and only fragmentary pieces ever reached Joseph Smith.”¹³ This copy of the Book of the Dead dated to probably sometime during the third to second century BC.¹⁴ The Book of the Dead is the name given by modern Egyptologists to a collection of writings called by the ancient Egyptians “Utterances of Coming Forth by Day” (*r3w nw prt hrw*).¹⁵ Among other purposes, this text “served as a protection for the bearer. It describes its purpose as aiding the spirit in becoming exalted, ascending to and descending from the presence of the gods, and appearing as whatever wanted, wherever wanted.”¹⁶ The Book of the Dead was a precursor to the Book of Breathings in the ancient Egyptian funerary tradition, and the latter seems to have generally but not entirely replaced the former beginning in the Greco-Roman period (ca. 330–30 BC). Some of the content and illustrations (or vignettes, as Egyptologists call them) from the Book of the Dead were incorporated into the Book of Breathings, showing a relationship and dependence between the two texts.¹⁷

Although the Book of the Dead is often (and understandably) referred to as a “funerary text,” Egyptologists now recognize that portions of this text were also used in non-funerary settings.¹⁸ For example, the Book of the Dead had a connection to the ancient Egyptian temple that may have significant implications for the Book of Abraham and for

12. Michael D. Rhodes, *Books of the Dead Belonging to Tshemmin and Neferirnub: A Translation and Commentary* (Provo, Utah: Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, 2010), 5.

13. John Gee, *An Introduction to the Book of Abraham* (Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2017), 76.

14. Rhodes, *Books of the Dead Belonging to Tshemmin and Neferirnub*, 7.

15. Rhodes, *Books of the Dead Belonging to Tshemmin and Neferirnub*, 1. For an accessible overview of the Book of the Dead, consult Foy Scalf, ed., *Book of the Dead: Becoming God in Ancient Egypt* (Chicago: Oriental Institute Museum Publications, 2017).

16. Gee, *Introduction to the Book of Abraham*, 76.

17. Marc Coenen, “An Introduction to the *Document of Breathing Made by Isis*,” *Revue d’Égyptologie* 49 (1998): 37–45; Marc Coenen, “On the Demise of the *Book of the Dead* in Ptolemaic Thebes,” *Revue d’Égyptologie* 52 (2001): 69–84.

18. John Gee, “The Use of the Daily Temple Liturgy in the Book of the Dead,” in *Totenbuch—Forschungen: Gesammelte Beiträge des 2. Internationalen Totenbuch—Symposiums, Bonn, 25. bis 29. September 2005*, ed. Burkhard Backes, Irmtraut Munro, and Simone Stöhr (Wiesbaden, Ger.: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2006), 73–86; Alexandra von Lieven, “Book of the Dead, Book of the Living: BD Spells as Temple Texts,” *Journal of Egyptian Archaeology* 98 (2012): 258–59; Giuseppina Lenzo, “Rituals in the Spells of the *Book of the Dead* in Ancient Egypt,” in *Text and Ritual in the Pentateuch: A Systematic and Comparative Approach*, ed. Christophe Nihan and Julia Rhyder (University Park, Penn.: Pennsylvania University Press and Eisenbrauns, 2021), 30–57.

the Latter-day Saint temple endowment.¹⁹ “The sections of Semminis’s Book of the Dead in the Joseph Smith Papyri cover part of the introductory chapter, some of the texts dealing with Semminis’s being able to appear as various birds or animals, texts allowing her to board the boat of the supreme god and meet with the council of the gods, texts providing her with food and other good things and making her happy, and a text asserting her worthiness to enter into the divine presence.”²⁰

Previous scholarship on the Joseph Smith Papyri identified P. Joseph Smith IIIa–b as belonging to a woman by the name of Neferirnub (*nfr-ir-nbw*).²¹ It was supposed that the female owner of this papyrus fragment, which “shows the deceased standing before [the god] Osiris with her heart being weighed in scales,”²² was someone other than Tshemmin and that therefore Joseph Smith possessed two different copies of the Book of the Dead belonging to two different women. As was demonstrated in 2019, however, Neferirnub was a nickname for Tshemmin, and thus, the two were the same woman. P. Joseph Smith II, IV–IX and P. Joseph Smith IIIa–b belonged to the same scroll.²³

The portion of the Book of the Dead previously assigned as P. Joseph Smith IIIa–b, commonly designated Spell or Chapter 125 by Egyptologists, was being used in Egyptian temples by the time of the creation of the Joseph Smith Papyri.²⁴ It was also being used in the initiation and purification rituals of Egyptian priests.²⁵ Interestingly, in 1835 Oliver

19. See Hugh W. Nibley, *The Message of the Joseph Smith Papyri: An Egyptian Endowment*, The Collected Works of Hugh Nibley 16 (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book; Provo, Utah: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, Brigham Young University, 2005); and Stephen O. Smoot and Quinten Barney, “The Book of the Dead as a Temple Text and the Implications for the Book of Abraham,” in *The Temple: Ancient and Restored*, ed. Stephen D. Ricks and Donald W. Parry, Temple on Mount Zion Series 3 (Orem, Utah: Interpreter Foundation; Salt Lake City: Eborn Books, 2016), 183–209.

20. Gee, *Introduction to the Book of Abraham*, 76.

21. See, for example, Rhodes, *Books of the Dead Belonging to Tshemmin and Neferirnub*, 57–59; and Ritner, *Joseph Smith Egyptian Papyri*, 205–7.

22. Rhodes, *Books of the Dead Belonging to Tshemmin and Neferirnub*, 57.

23. Malcom Mosher Jr., “New Light on P. Joseph Smith 2 and 3,” in *The Book of the Dead, Saite through Ptolemaic Periods: Essays on Books of the Dead and Related Topics*, ed. Malcolm Mosher Jr. (Prescott, Ariz.: SPBDStudies, 2019), 299–312. Note how Gee, *Introduction to the Book of Abraham*, 57–67, 73–81, anticipated Mosher’s own conclusions.

24. Von Lieven, “Book of the Dead, Book of the Living,” 263–64.

25. Robert K. Ritner, “Book of the Dead 125,” in *The Context of Scripture: Volume II, Monumental Inscriptions from the Biblical World*, ed. William W. Hallo and K. Lawson Younger Jr. (Leiden, Neth.: Brill, 2003), 59–60; John Gee, “Prophets, Initiation, and the Egyptian Temple,” *Journal of the Society for the Study of Egyptian Antiquities* 31 (2004): 101–2.

Cowdery described the scene portrayed in this fragment as the judgment of the dead.²⁶

The Scroll of Amenhotep (“Valuable Discovery”)²⁷

Another papyrus roll that Joseph Smith owned belonged to a man named Amenhotep (*Imn-htp*).²⁸ Unfortunately, the original papyrus containing this text is not extant. It is only known from a nineteenth-century copy in the handwriting of Oliver Cowdery and appears, based on the reading of one Egyptologist, to be portions of a copy of the Book of the Dead.²⁹ Because only a few lines of hieratic Egyptian characters were copied (enough to give us the name of the owner of the papyrus and perhaps a sense of what it contained, but not much more), the dating of this papyrus is unknown.

The Hypocephalus of Sheshonq (Facsimile 2)

Finally, Joseph Smith owned a hypocephalus that anciently belonged to a man named Sheshonq or Shishak (*ššḳ*).³⁰ This hypocephalus was published on March 15, 1842, in the *Times and Seasons* as Facsimile 2 of the Book of Abraham.³¹ Unfortunately, the original hypocephalus is not extant. However, because this type of document is rare and belonged primarily to a select group of Egyptian priests and their family members, we can date Sheshonq’s hypocephalus to sometime during the Ptolemaic

26. Oliver Cowdery, “Egyptian Mummies—Ancient Records,” *Latter Day Saints’ Messenger and Advocate* 2, no. 3 (December 1835): 236.

27. See 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), 27–41.

28. John Gee, *A Guide to the Joseph Smith Papyri* (Provo, Utah: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 2000), 10–13; Ritner, *Joseph Smith Egyptian Papyri*, 209–13.

29. Ritner, *Joseph Smith Egyptian Papyri*, 209, misleadingly describes the document as Joseph Smith’s “hand copy.” In fact, besides his signature on the front cover, Joseph Smith’s handwriting does not appear in the “Valuable Discovery” notebook. The English text is in the hand of Oliver Cowdery, and, in the judgment of Jensen and Hauglid, it is “likely” that so are the hieratic characters. See Jensen and Hauglid, *Revelations and Translations, Volume 4*, 27.

30. Michael D. Rhodes, “A Translation and Commentary of the Joseph Smith Hypocephalus,” *BYU Studies* 17, no. 3 (Spring 1977): 260–62; Michael D. Rhodes, “The Joseph Smith Hypocephalus . . . Twenty Years Later,” FARMS Preliminary Report (1997). See “The Purpose and Function of the Egyptian Hypocephalus,” 234–46 herein.

31. “The Book of Abraham,” *Times and Seasons* 3, no. 10 (March 15, 1842): [721].

Period (ca. the fourth to third centuries BC).³² The significance and purpose of the ancient Egyptian hypocephalus is described elsewhere in this volume.³³

It should be remembered that this Egyptian material is what we currently *know* Joseph Smith possessed. It is possible, and indeed likely, that Joseph Smith possessed more papyri than have survived. Eyewitness accounts of those who viewed the papyri during Joseph Smith's lifetime suggest a substantial portion of papyri is no longer extant.³⁴ What may have been contained on the portion of missing papyrus (including, potentially, a copy of what modern readers would identify as the Book of Abraham) and exactly how much papyrus is missing are open questions that scholars are still investigating and debating.³⁵

Further Reading

Gee, John. "The Contents of the Joseph Smith Papyri." In *An Introduction to the Book of Abraham*, 73–81. Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2017.

Rhodes, Michael D. *Books of the Dead Belonging to Thsemmin and Nefer-irrub: A Translation and Commentary*. Provo, Utah: Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, 2010.

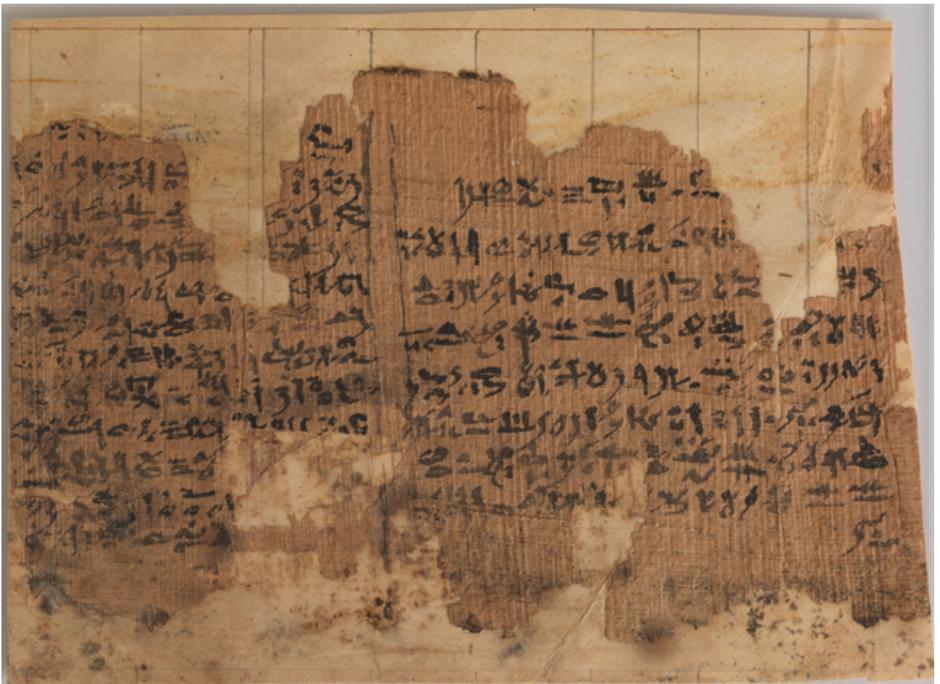
———. *The Hor Book of Breathings: A Translation and Commentary*. Provo, Utah: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, Brigham Young University, 2002.

32. Tamás Mekis, *The Hypocephalus: An Ancient Egyptian Funerary Amulet* (Oxford: Archaeopress, 2020), 2, 208.

33. See "The Purpose and Function of the Egyptian Hypocephalus," 234–46 herein.

34. See the discussion in John Gee, "Eyewitness, Hearsay, and Physical Evidence of the Joseph Smith Papyri," in *The Disciple as Witness: Essays on Latter-day Saint History and Doctrine in Honor of Richard Lloyd Anderson*, ed. Stephen D. Ricks, Donald W. Parry, and Andrew H. Hedges (Provo, Utah: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 2000), 175–217; and Kerry Muhlestein, "Papyri and Presumptions: A Careful Examination of the Eyewitness Accounts Associated with the Joseph Smith Papyri," *Journal of Mormon History* 42, no. 4 (2016): 31–50.

35. For different perspectives and arguments on the subject of how much papyri is missing and what was potentially contained thereon, see John Gee, "Some Puzzles from the Joseph Smith Papyri," *FARMS Review* 20, no. 1 (2008): 117–23; Andrew W. Cook and Christopher C. Smith, "The Original Length of the Scroll of Hôr," *Dialogue* 43, no. 4 (2010): 1–42; John Gee, "Formulas and Faith," *Journal of the Book of Mormon and Other Restoration Scripture* 21, no. 1 (2012): 60–65; and Christopher C. Smith, "'That Which Is Lost': Assessing the State of Preservation of the Joseph Smith Papyri," *John Whitmer Historical Association Journal* 31, no. 1 (Spring/Summer 2011): 69–83.



FIGURES 1 AND 2. P. Joseph Smith I (*top*) and XI, fragments of the Book of Breathings of Horos, ca. 238–153 BC. © Intellectual Reserve, Inc. Courtesy Church History Library, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.



FIGURE 3. P. Joseph Smith X, fragment of the Book of Breathing of Horos, ca. 238–153 BC. © Intellectual Reserve, Inc. Courtesy Church History Library, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.



FIGURE 4. P. Joseph Smith II, fragment of the Book of the Dead of Tshemmin, ca. 300–100 BC. © Intellectual Reserve, Inc. Courtesy Church History Library, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

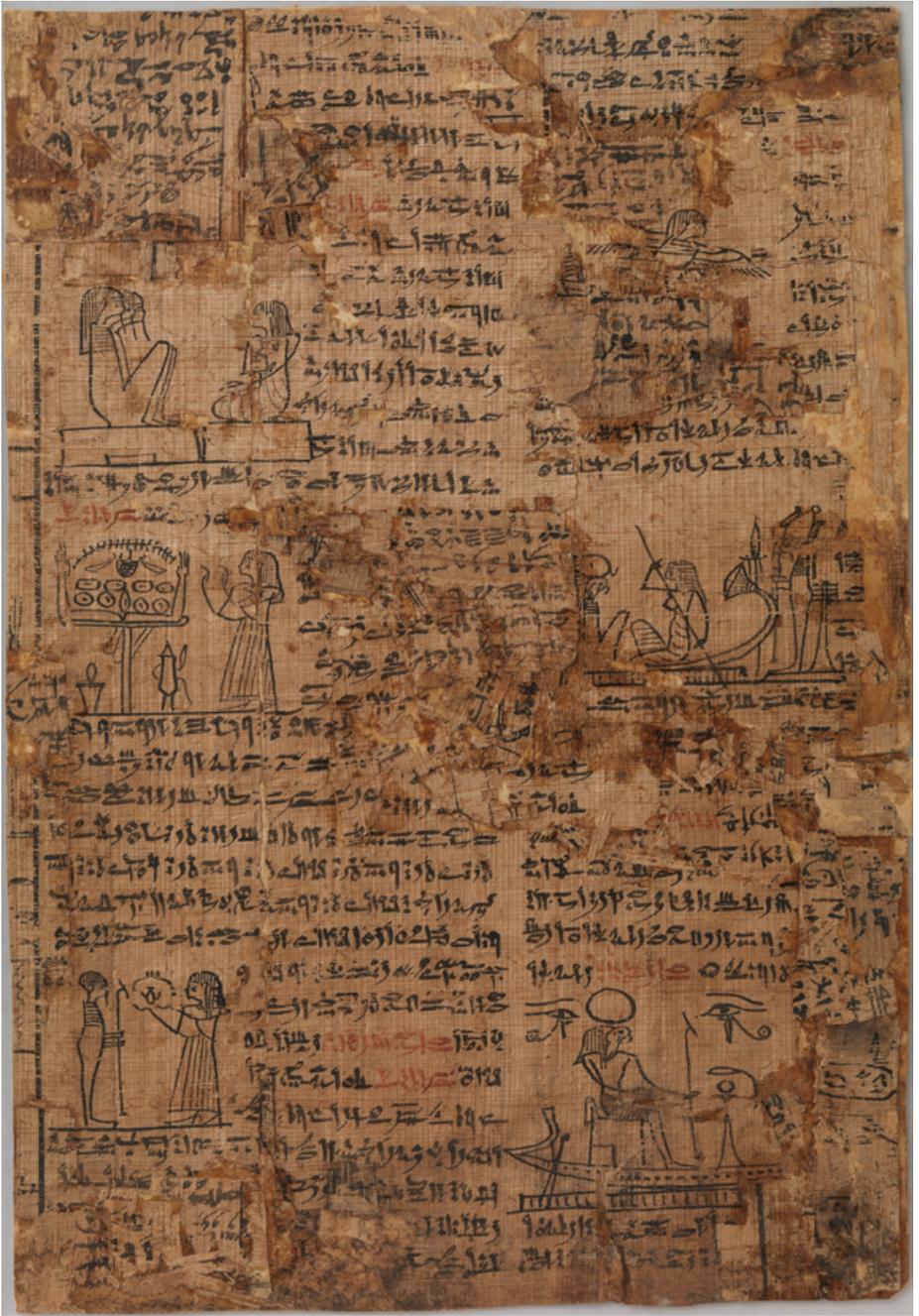


FIGURE 5. P. Joseph Smith IV, fragment of the Book of the Dead of Tshemmin, ca. 300–100 BC. © Intellectual Reserve, Inc. Courtesy Church History Library, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.



FIGURE 6. P. Joseph Smith V-VI, fragments of the Book of the Dead of Tschemmin, ca. 300-100 BC. © Intellectual Reserve, Inc. Courtesy Church History Library, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.



FIGURE 7. P. Joseph Smith VII, fragment of the Book of the Dead of Tshemmin, ca. 300–100 BC. © Intellectual Reserve, Inc. Courtesy Church History Library, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

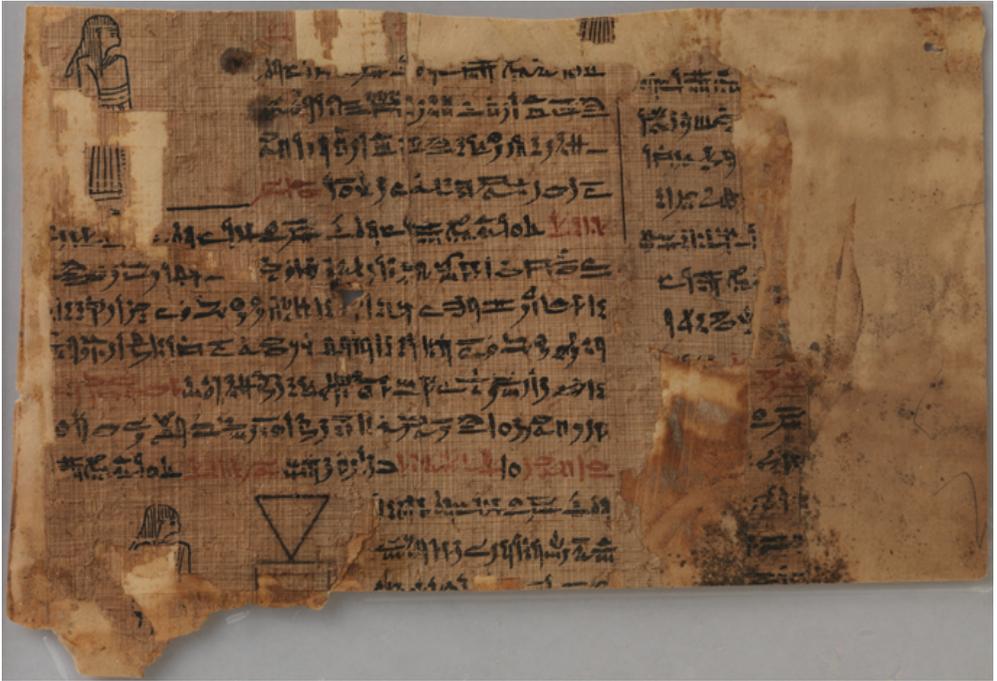


FIGURE 8. P. Joseph Smith VIII, fragment of the Book of the Dead of Tshemmin, ca. 300–100 BC. © Intellectual Reserve, Inc. Courtesy Church History Library, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

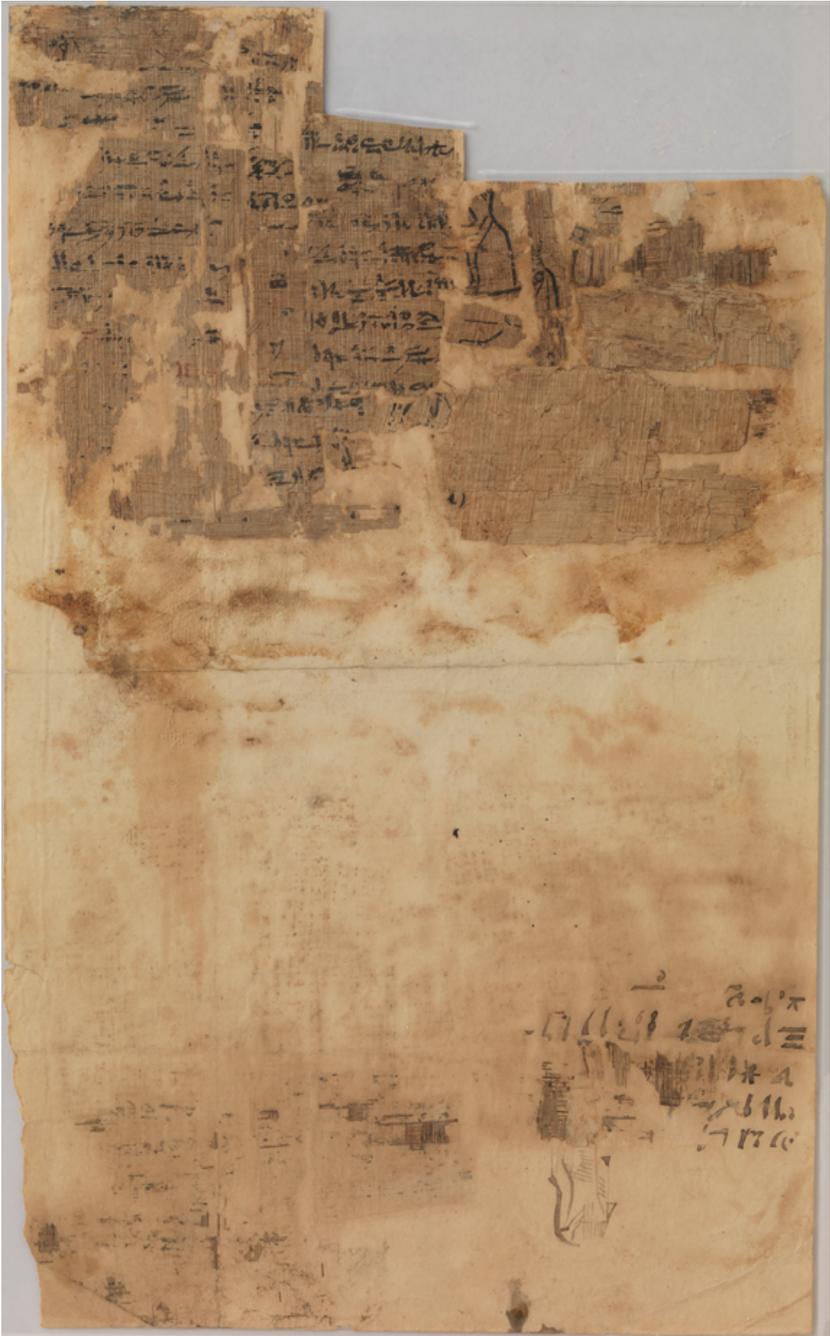
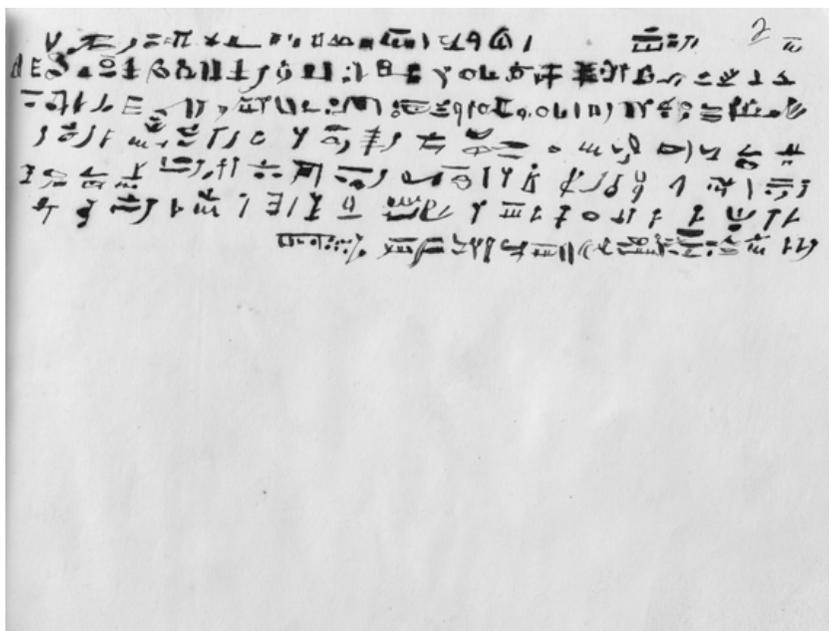
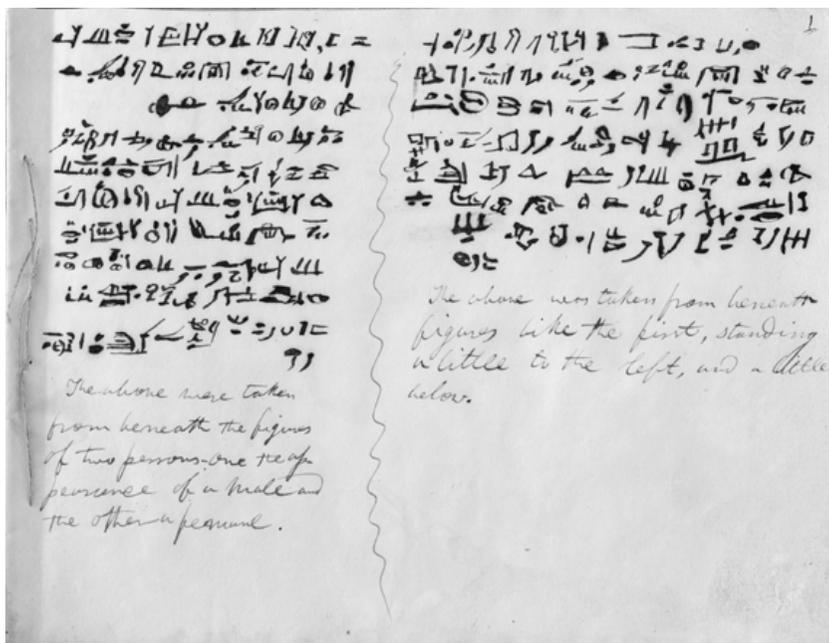


FIGURE 9. P. Joseph Smith IX, fragment of the Book of the Dead of Tshemmin, ca. 300–100 BC. © Intellectual Reserve, Inc. Courtesy Church History Library, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.



FIGURE 10. P. Joseph Smith IIIa–b, fragment of the Book of the Dead of Neferirnebu/Tshemmin, ca. 300–100 BC. © Intellectual Reserve, Inc. Courtesy Church History Library, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.



FIGURES 11 AND 12. "Valuable Discovery" (front and back of page), ca. early July 1835, copy of hieratic characters from the Book of the Dead of Amenhotep, date unknown. © Intellectual Reserve, Inc. Courtesy Church History Library, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

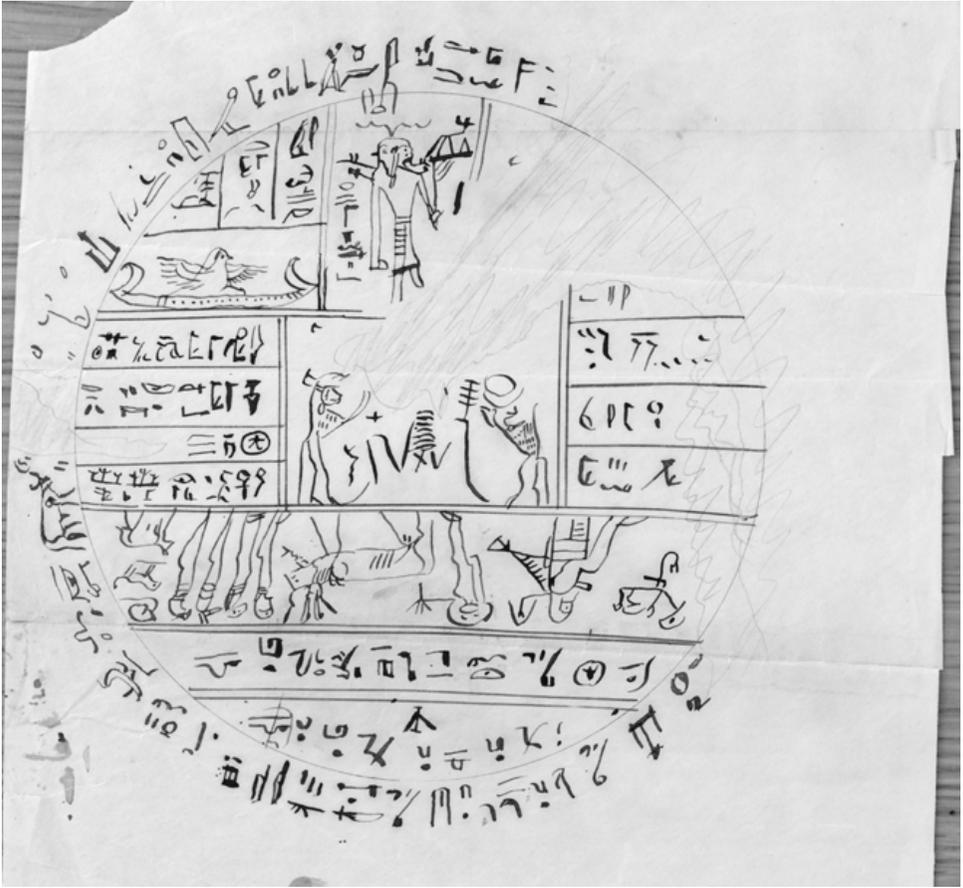


FIGURE 13. Hypocephalus of Sheshonq, ca. 300–200 BC, copied between ca. July 1835 and ca. March 1842. © Intellectual Reserve, Inc. Courtesy Church History Library, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

How Did Joseph Smith Translate the Book of Abraham?

Multiple sources associated with the coming forth of the Book of Abraham spoke of Joseph Smith “translating” the text from the papyri he acquired.¹ The Prophet himself used this language to describe his own activity with the text. For example, an entry in his journal under the date November 19, 1835, indicates the Prophet “spent the day in translating” the Egyptian records.² In an unpublished editorial that was apparently meant to be printed in the March 1, 1842, issue of the *Times and Seasons* (the issue that saw the publication of the first installment of the Book of Abraham), Joseph Smith signaled his desire to “contin[u]e to translate & publish [the text] as fast as possible [until] the whole is completed.”³ What was published with the Book of Abraham was a

1. See, for instance, “History, 1838–1856, Volume B-1 [1 September 1834–2 November 1838],” 596, Joseph Smith Papers, accessed December 13, 2022, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/history-1838-1856-volume-b-1-1-september-1834-2-november-1838/50>; “John Whitmer, History, 1831–circa 1847,” [76], in *Histories, Volume 2: Assigned Histories, 1831–1847*, ed. Karen Lynn Davidson, Richard L. Jensen, and David J. Whittaker, Joseph Smith Papers (Salt Lake City: Church Historian’s Press, 2012), 86; and Warren Parrish, letter to the editor of the *Painesville Republican*, February 5, 1838, in “Mormonism,” *Painesville Republican* 2, nos. 14–15 (February 15, 1838): [3].

2. “Journal, 1835–1836,” November 19, 1835, 46, in *Journals, Volume 1: 1832–1839*, ed. Dean C. Jessee, Mark Ashurst-McGee, and Richard L. Jensen, Joseph Smith Papers (Salt Lake City: Church Historian’s Press, 2008), 107.

3. “Editorial, circa 1 March 1842, Draft,” 1, in *Documents, Volume 9: December 1841–April 1842*, ed. Alex D. Smith, Christian K. Heimburger, and Christopher James Blythe, Joseph Smith Papers (Salt Lake City: Church Historian’s Press, 2019), 207. See also Wilford Woodruff, “Letter to Parley P. Pratt, 12 June 1842,” [3], Wilford Woodruff Papers, <https://wilfordwoodruffpapers.org/documents/1981baad-5423-44bb-905b-cd4339c8f85d/page/aa122c61-597f-4e47-ac2b-9278833b3ca3>: “The Saints abroad manifest much interest in the Book of Abraham in the T[imes] & Seasons it will be continued as fast as Joseph gets time to translate.”

preface announcing it as “A Translation Of some ancient Records that have fallen into our hands . . . purporting to be the writings of Abraham.”⁴

On at least one occasion shortly after its publication, Joseph Smith described the Book of Abraham as a “revelation” instead of a translation.⁵ This raises a question about what these words may have meant to the Prophet and what he may have thought about the nature of the text of the Book of Abraham that he produced. There are plenty of instances where Joseph used the word “translation” to mean utilizing available scholarly tools to convert an ancient language into modern English. This, for example, is how he used the term when studying Hebrew, which he learned from a teacher using a grammar book and dictionary.⁶ However, as with the Book of Mormon, sources indicate that Joseph professed that the translation of the Book of Abraham came by revelation and the gift and power of God. So, while Joseph appears to have used the word “translation” to describe the Book of Abraham as meaning the conversion of an ancient text into modern English, the means or methods he used to accomplish this translation were uncommon by conventional academic standards—namely, revelation. This is similar to what Joseph said about his efforts to render other ancient scriptural texts into English throughout his ministry. A review of the different texts he produced and how he produced them, therefore, appears relevant to how we might better understand the nature of the translation of the Book of Abraham.⁷

4. “The Book of Abraham,” *Times and Seasons* 3, no. 9 (March 1, 1842): 704.

5. “Persecution of the Prophets,” *Times and Seasons* 3, no. 21 (September 1, 1842): 902.

6. While learning Hebrew, the Prophet spoke of “studying,” “reading,” “learning,” and “translating” biblical Hebrew in journal entries dated January 26, 29; February 1, 3, 5, 9, 11–13, 15, 21–23, 26–28; and March 10, 16, 24–25, 29, 1836. See “Journal, 1835–1836,” 142–185, Joseph Smith Papers, accessed December 13, 2022, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/journal-1835-1836/143>. For a discussion, see Matthew J. Grey, “The Word of the Lord in the Original: Joseph Smith’s Study of Hebrew in Kirtland,” in *Approaching Antiquity: Joseph Smith and the Ancient World*, ed. Lincoln H. Blumell, Matthew J. Grey, and Andrew H. Hedges (Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2015), 249–302.

7. See the overview and discussion in Kerry Muhlestein, “Book of Abraham, Translation Of,” in *The Pearl of Great Price Reference Companion*, ed. Dennis L. Largey (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2017), 63–69; Kerry Muhlestein, “Assessing the Joseph Smith Papyri: An Introduction to the Historiography of Their Acquisitions, Translations, and Interpretations,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 22 (2016): 32–39; Hugh Nibley, “Translated Correctly?,” in *The Message of the Joseph Smith Papyri: An Egyptian Endowment*, The Collected Works of Hugh Nibley 16 (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book; Provo, Utah: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, Brigham Young University, 2005), 51–65; and 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), xxii–xxvi.

The Book of Mormon

Joseph Smith's signature work of scripture is the Book of Mormon, which the Prophet claimed to have translated from ancient gold plates "by the gift, and power of God."⁸ While early efforts to decipher the "reformed Egyptian" (Morm. 9:32) characters on the plates evidently did involve some mental effort by the Prophet and his scribes,⁹ ultimately the translation was revealed through the use of divinely prepared seer stones.¹⁰ Because we benefit from multiple eyewitness accounts of those who participated in the coming forth of the Book of Mormon, we have a fairly good understanding of how it was produced. "When Joseph Smith began translating the Book of Mormon in 1827, he usually left the plates in a box or wrapped in a cloth, placed the [Nephite] interpreters or his seer stone (both of which seem to have been called Urim and Thummim) in a hat, and read the translation he saw in the stone to a scribe."¹¹ All of this suggests that Joseph Smith's mechanism for translating the Book of Mormon, while still conveying one language (Egyptian or Hebrew) to another (English), was more closely synonymous with revelation.¹² "This sacred ancient record was not 'translated' in the traditional way that scholars would translate ancient texts by learning an ancient language. We ought to look at the process more like a 'revelation' with the aid of physical instruments provided by the Lord, as opposed to a 'translation' by one with knowledge of languages."¹³

8. "Church History," *Times and Seasons* 3, no. 9 (March 1, 1842): 707.

9. David E. Sloan, "The Anthon Transcripts and the Translation of the Book of Mormon: Studying It Out in the Mind of Joseph Smith," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 5, no. 2 (1996): 57–81.

10. See Michael Hubbard MacKay and Gerrit J. Dirkmaat, "Firsthand Witness Accounts of the Translation Process," in *The Coming Forth of the Book of Mormon: A Marvelous Work and a Wonder*, ed. Dennis L. Largey and others (Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2015), 61–79; and Michael Hubbard MacKay and Nicholas J. Frederick, *Joseph Smith's Seer Stones* (Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2016).

11. John Gee, *An Introduction to the Book of Abraham* (Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2017), 20.

12. For an overview, see Michael Hubbard MacKay, "'Git Them Translated': Translating the Characters on the Gold Plates," in Blumell, Grey, and Hedges, *Approaching Antiquity*, 83–116; and Brant A. Gardner, "Translating the Book of Mormon," in *A Reason for Faith: Navigating LDS Doctrine and History*, ed. Laura Harris Hales (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book; Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 2016), 21–32.

13. Ulisses Soares, "The Coming Forth of the Book of Mormon," *Ensign* 50, no. 5 (May 2020): 33.

The Parchment of John (Doctrine and Covenants 7)

Section 7 of the Doctrine and Covenants was received by Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery in April 1829 just before or during the time when Oliver acted as a scribe for the translation of the Book of Mormon.¹⁴ When this section was first published in the Book of Commandments in 1833, it was described as “a Revelation given to Joseph and Oliver” and was said to have been “translated from parchment, written and hid up by” a figure named John (presumably the beloved disciple).¹⁵ This same description was given when the text was republished in 1835 and 1842 under the supervision of Joseph Smith.¹⁶

This revealed “translation” of John’s record was received, like the Book of Mormon, through divine instruments (the Urim and Thummim).¹⁷ It is important to remember that during this process Joseph Smith “did not have physical possession of the papyrus [of John] he was translating.”¹⁸ In addition, textual analysis of Doctrine and Covenants 7 reveals that

14. “Account of John, April 1829–C [D&C 7],” in *Documents, Volume 1: July 1828–June 1831*, ed. Michael Hubbard MacKay and others, Joseph Smith Papers (Salt Lake City: Church Historian’s Press, 2013), 47–48. For the historical context of this section, see Jeffrey G. Cannon, “Oliver Cowdery’s Gift: D&C 6, 7, 8, 9, 13,” in *Revelations in Context: The Stories behind the Sections of the Doctrine and Covenants*, ed. Matthew McBride and James Goldberg (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2016), 15–19; and David W. Grua and William V. Smith, “The Tarrying of the Beloved Disciple: The Textual Formation of the Account of John,” in *Producing Ancient Scripture: Joseph Smith’s Translation Projects in the Development of Mormon Christianity*, ed. Michael Hubbard MacKay, Mark Ashurst-McGee, and Brian M. Hauglid (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2020), 231–61.

15. “Chapter VI,” in *A Book of Commandments, for the Government of the Church of Christ, Organized according to Law, on the 6th of April, 1830* (Independence, Mo.: W. W. Phelps, 1833), 18. In the Manuscript Revelation Book, this section is called a “commandment” and a “revelation” but not explicitly a “translation.” “Revelation Book 1,” in *Revelations and Translations, Volume 1: Manuscript Revelation Books*, ed. Robin Scott Jensen, Robert J. Woodford, and Steven C. Harper, Joseph Smith Papers (Salt Lake City: Church Historian’s Press, 2011), 15.

16. “Section XXXIII,” in *Doctrine and Covenants of the Church of the Latter Day Saints: Carefully Selected from the Revelations of God* (Kirtland, Ohio: F. G. Williams and Company, 1835), 160; “History of Joseph Smith,” *Times and Seasons* 3, no. 18 (July 15, 1842): 853. See the observation in Robert J. Woodford, “The Historical Development of the Doctrine and Covenants,” 3 vols. (PhD diss., Brigham Young University, 1974), 1:176.

17. “History, 1838–1856, Volume A-1 [23 December 1805–30 August 1834],” 15, Joseph Smith Papers, accessed December 13, 2022, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/history-1838-1856-volume-a-1-23-december-1805-30-august-1834/21>.

18. Gee, *Introduction to the Book of Abraham*, 21; compare MacKay and others, *Documents, Volume 1*, 48 n. 129.

CHAPTER VI.

1 *A Revelation given to Joseph and Oliver, in Harmony, Pennsylvania, April, 1829, when they desired to know whether John, the beloved disciple, tarried on earth. Translated from parchment, written and hid up by himself.*

AND the Lord said unto me, John my beloved, what desirest thou? and I said Lord, give unto me power that I may bring souls unto thee.— And the Lord said unto me: Verily, verily I say unto thee, because thou desiredst this, thou shalt tarry till I come in my glory:

SECTION XXXIII.

A Revelation given to Joseph Smith, jr. and Oliver Cowdery, in Harmony, Pennsylvania, April, 1829, when they desired to know whether John, the beloved disciple, tarried on earth.— Translated from parchment, written and hid up by himself.

1 And the Lord said unto me, John, my beloved, what desirest thou? For if ye shall ask, what you will, it shall be granted unto you. And I said unto him, Lord, give unto me power over death, that I may live and bring souls unto thee.

FIGURES 14 AND 15. "Chapter VI," Book of Commandments, 1833 (top), and "Section XXXIII," Doctrine and Covenants, 1835. © Intellectual Reserve, Inc. Courtesy Church History Library, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. The heading to what is today canonized as section 7 of the Doctrine and Covenants in both the 1833 Book of Commandments and the 1835 Doctrine and Covenants identifies this text as both a revelation and a translation.

when this section was republished in the 1835 first edition of the Doctrine and Covenants, it had been revised and expanded from its initial form as it appeared in the 1833 Book of Commandments, indicating that expansion and revision could be included in the scope of Joseph's work as a translator.¹⁹

The “New Translation” of the Bible

Another important effort undertaken by Joseph Smith was what he called a “new translation” of the Bible (see D&C 37:1; 45:60–61; 73:3–4; 93:53).²⁰ Undertaken principally between June 1830 and July 1833, this “new translation” of the Bible (today called the Joseph Smith Translation or JST) was not accomplished by the Prophet carefully scrutinizing Hebrew and Greek manuscripts with the aid of a grammar and lexicon, nor even, apparently, by consulting his seer stone or the Urim and Thummim. Rather, Joseph revised the English text of the King James Version of the Bible by inspiration.²¹ That revelation specifically was understood to be Joseph's method in producing this new translation of the Bible is indicated by both evidence from the original JST manuscripts and the recollections of at least one source who claimed to be an eyewitness to the process.²² With language similar to how Joseph Smith described the

19. Grua and Smith, “Tarrying of the Beloved Disciple,” 254–60.

20. “Letter to Church Leaders in Jackson County, Missouri, 25 June 1833,” [1], and “Letter to Church Leaders in Jackson County, Missouri, 2 July 1833,” 52, in *Documents, Volume 3: February 1833–March 1834*, ed. Gerrit J. Dirkmaat and others, Joseph Smith Papers (Salt Lake City: Church Historian's Press, 2014), 154, 167.

21. See Robert J. Matthews, “A Plainer Translation”: *Joseph Smith's Translation of the Bible—a History and Commentary* (Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University Press, 1975); Kent P. Jackson, “Joseph Smith's New Translation of the Bible,” in *Joseph Smith, the Prophet and Seer*, ed. Richard Neitzel Holzapfel and Kent P. Jackson (Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2010), 51–76; Kent P. Jackson, “The King James Bible and the Joseph Smith Translation,” in *The King James Bible and the Restoration*, ed. Kent P. Jackson (Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 2011), 197–214; Royal Skousen, “The Earliest Textual Sources for Joseph Smith's ‘New Translation’ of the King James Bible,” *FARMS Review* 17, no. 2 (2005): 451–70; Royal Skousen, *The History of the Text of the Book of Mormon. Part Five: The King James Quotations in the Book of Mormon* (Provo, Utah: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 2019), 132–40; Jared W. Ludlow, “The Joseph Smith Translation of the Bible: Ancient Material Restored or Inspired Commentary? Canonical or Optional? Finished or Unfinished?,” *BYU Studies Quarterly* 60, no. 3 (2021): 147–57; and Kent P. Jackson, *Understanding Joseph Smith's Translation of the Bible* (Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2022).

22. Early chapters of the original manuscript of JST Genesis 1–24 are prefaced by scribal notes such as: “A Revelation given to Joseph the Revelator June 1830” (preface to Moses 1), “A Revelation given to the Elders of the Church of Christ On the first Book

translation of the Book of Mormon, a superscription in the original dictated manuscript of JST Matthew explicitly designates the text “A Translation of the New Testament translated by the power of God.”²³

Even though Joseph was revising the English text of the KJV and sometimes revealing entirely new content (such as much of what is today called the book of Moses in the Pearl of Great Price), he nevertheless called the project a translation. It is possible that part of the process of revising some portions of the text of the JST involved Joseph consulting a popular biblical commentary, although the extent of this influence on the JST is debatable.²⁴ While it is arguable that some of Joseph Smith’s revisions to the KJV Bible convey a more precise reading of the underlying Greek and Hebrew, or that other portions revealed by the Prophet in some way correspond to nonextant ancient manuscripts, a broader view of the types of revisions he made to the Bible suggests that he was doing more with his translation than just rendering ancient languages.²⁵

of Moses” (preface to Moses 2/Genesis 1), “A Revelation concerning Adam after he had been driven out of the garden of Eden” (preface to Moses 5/Genesis 4). See “Old Testament Revision 1,” [1], 3, 8, Joseph Smith Papers, accessed December 13, 2022, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/old-testament-revision-1/3>. Many years after the project was finished, Orson Pratt recalled witnessing Joseph Smith dictate his revisions to the Bible while under the inspiration of God. “He was inspired of God to translate the Scriptures,” wrote Pratt in 1856, speaking of the JST. Orson Pratt, “Spiritual Gifts” (n.p., 1856), 71. A few years later, Pratt said in a sermon how he “saw [Joseph Smith’s] countenance lighted up as the inspiration of the Holy Ghost rested upon him, dictating the great and most precious revelations now printed for our guide.” Pratt specifically remembered seeing Joseph “translating, by inspiration, the Old and New Testaments, and the inspired book of Abraham from Egyptian papyrus.” Orson Pratt, in *Journal of Discourses*, 26 vols. (Liverpool: F. D. Richards, 1855–86), 7:176 (July 10, 1859). That Pratt mentioned the JST and the Book of Abraham together may be significant in how Joseph Smith’s contemporaries understood and contextualized these two scriptural productions.

23. “New Testament Revision 1,” 1, Joseph Smith Papers, accessed December 13, 2022, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/new-testament-revision-1/5>.

24. See Thomas A. Wayment, “Intertextuality and the Purpose of Joseph Smith’s New Translation of the Bible,” in *Foundational Texts of Mormonism: Examining Major Early Sources*, ed. Mark Ashurst-McGee, Robin Scott Jensen, and Sharalyn D. Howcroft (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 74–100; Thomas A. Wayment, “Joseph Smith, Adam Clarke, and the Making of a Bible Revision,” *Journal of Mormon History* 46, no. 3 (July 2020): 1–22; and Thomas A. Wayment and Haley Wilson-Lemmon, “A Recovered Resource: The Use of Adam Clarke’s Bible Commentary in Joseph Smith’s Bible Translation,” in MacKay, Ashurst-McGee, and Hauglid, *Producing Ancient Scripture*, 262–84. Kent P. Jackson, “Some Notes on Joseph Smith and Adam Clarke,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 40 (2020): 15–60, has critiqued the claim that Joseph Smith relied on Adam Clarke’s commentary. The question of how dependent Joseph Smith may have been on Adam Clarke or other sources remains an open one.

25. Jackson, *Understanding Joseph Smith’s Translation of the Bible*, 31–37, discusses the types of changes that Joseph Smith appears to have made to the Bible, including

The Record of John (D&C 93:6–18)

Although not typically thought of as a translation since it is embedded in a longer revelation received by the Prophet on May 6, 1833, it could be reasonably argued that the “record of John” in Doctrine and Covenants 93:6–18 is in fact another translated text and should be included among Joseph Smith’s scriptural translation projects.²⁶ Like the Parchment of John (D&C 7), this portion of Doctrine and Covenants 93 quotes a figure named John (once again presumably the beloved disciple, but possibly John the Baptist²⁷) in the first person and promises that “if [readers] are faithful [they] shall receive the fulness of the record of John” (v. 18; compare v. 6). “Section 93 draws on otherwise lost writings of John,” recognizes one scholar. “It is clear that the revelation restores tantalizing lost texts and promises that even more will be forthcoming.”²⁸ Little is known about the circumstances surrounding the reception of this section.²⁹ It is clear that it was received in the context of the Prophet’s work of translating the Bible,³⁰ but it is unknown if Joseph used the seer stone to see and restore (“translate”) these words from John. There is no evidence that Joseph was physically handling any ancient manuscripts when he received this revelation and rendered these words from John. Whatever the case, this “revelation was bold and new, yet also ancient and familiar. As with so many of Joseph Smith’s revelations, it recovered lost truths that were apparently known to biblical figures.”³¹

restoring original text, restoring things said or done but never recorded in the Bible, modernizing the language of the Bible, harmonizing biblical passages with themselves or with modern revelation, and “common sense” revising to correct errors. These are in addition to a number of other possibilities, which include instances of the Prophet, by revelation, giving more precise renderings of the original languages. See also Matthews, “*Plainer Translation*,” 253; and Scott H. Faulring, Kent P. Jackson, and Robert J. Matthews, eds., *Joseph Smith’s New Translation of the Bible: Original Manuscripts* (Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 2004), 8–11.

26. Nicholas J. Frederick, “Translation, Revelation, and the Hermeneutics of Theological Innovation: Joseph Smith and the Record of John,” in MacKay, Ashurst-McGee, and Hauglid, *Producing Ancient Scripture*, 304–27.

27. Compare Robert J. Matthews, “Record of John,” in *Doctrine and Covenants Reference Companion*, ed. Dennis L. Largey (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2012), 534–35, who makes an argument that the John in this passage is John the Baptist.

28. Steven C. Harper, *Making Sense of the Doctrine and Covenants: A Guided Tour through Modern Revelations* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2008), 346.

29. Harper, *Making Sense of the Doctrine and Covenants*, 345.

30. Matthew McBride, “Man Was Also in the Beginning with God: D&C 93,” in McBride and Goldberg, *Revelations in Context*, 192–95.

31. McBride, “Man Was Also in the Beginning with God,” 193.

The Book of Abraham

This brings us to the Book of Abraham, the translation of which must be viewed within the broader context of Joseph Smith's other scriptural translations. When it comes to the nature of the translation of the Book of Abraham, there is not much direct evidence for how Joseph Smith accomplished the work. "No known first-person account from Joseph Smith exists to explain the translation of the Book of Abraham, and the scribes who worked on the project and others who claimed knowledge of the process provided only vague or general reminiscences."³² John Whitmer, then acting as the Church's historian and recorder, commented that "Joseph the Seer saw these Record[s] and by the revelation of Jesus Christ could translate these records, . . . which when all translated will be a pleasing history and of great value to the saints."³³ Another important source is Warren Parrish, one of the scribes who assisted Joseph in the production of the Book of Abraham. After his disaffection from the Church in 1837, Parrish reported that in his capacity as Joseph's scribe he "penned down the translation of the Egyptian Hieroglyphicks as [Joseph] claimed to receive it by direct inspiration from Heaven."³⁴ Although no longer a believer at the time he composed his letter, Parrish's statement, like Whitmer's, emphasizes that Joseph's claimed method of his "translation of the Egyptian Hieroglyphicks" was revelatory, not academic, but also that the Prophet was still claiming to perform a translation of an ancient language. Unfortunately, Parrish did not elaborate further on the precise nature of this translation "by direct inspiration," although his statement does, intriguingly, echo the language Oliver Cowdery used to describe the translation of the Book of Mormon.³⁵

Other sources reported that the Prophet used the Urim and Thummim or a seer stone in the translation of the Book of Abraham.³⁶ A hostile

32. Jensen and Hauglid, *Revelations and Translations, Volume 4*, xxiii.

33. "John Whitmer, History, 1831–circa 1847," 86.

34. Parrish, letter to the editor of the *Painesville Republican*, [3].

35. "These were days never to be forgotten—to sit under the sound of a voice dictated by the *inspiration* of heaven, awakened the utmost gratitude of this bosom! Day after day I continued, uninterrupted, to write from his mouth, as he translated with the *Urim* and *Thummim*, or, as the Nephites would have said, 'interpreters,' the history, or record, called 'The Book of Mormon.'" Oliver Cowdery, "Dear Brother," *Latter Day Saints' Messenger and Advocate* 1, no. 1 (October 1834): 14, emphasis in original.

36. See Jay M. Todd, *The Saga of the Book of Abraham* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1969), 175–77, 219–33; H. Donl Peterson, *The Story of the Book of Abraham: Mummies, Manuscripts, and Mormonism* (Springville, Utah: CFI, 2008), 175–76; and Stephen O.

newspaper, the *Cleveland Whig*, relayed in August 1835, “We are credibly informed that the Mormons have purchased of Mr. Chandler, three of the mummies, which he recently exhibited in this village; and that the prophet Joe has . . . examin[ed] the papyrus through his spectacles,” meaning most likely his seer stone, since there is no evidence that the angel Moroni returned the Urim and Thummim (the Nephite “Interpreters”) to Joseph Smith after 1829. The source named by the *Cleveland Whig* for this claim appears to have been Frederick G. Williams, who was a scribe in the translation of the Book of Abraham, and who, according to the paper, was “travelling about the country” with “this shallow and contemptible story.”³⁷ Because this newspaper’s report is early and names a source close to Joseph Smith, it “should [at least] be taken seriously.”³⁸ But at the same time, because it is thirdhand and hostile, it must be also accepted cautiously. Friendly sources close to Joseph later reported the use of a seer stone in the translation.³⁹ With the exception of Wilford Woodruff, who helped prepare the Book of Abraham for publication in 1842,⁴⁰ these sources were not immediately involved in the production of the text, and in one instance may have been confusing the translation process of the Book of Abraham with the translation process of the Book

Smoot, “Did Joseph Smith Use a Seer Stone in the Translation of the Book of Abraham?,” *Religious Educator* 23, no. 2 (2022): 65–107.

37. “Another Humbug,” *Cleveland Whig*, August 5, 1835, 1. See the discussion in Smoot, “Did Joseph Smith Use a Seer Stone?,” 69–72; and MacKay and Frederick, *Joseph Smith’s Seer Stones*, 127–28, who suggest the newspaper’s source was actually William W. Phelps, another scribe in the Egyptian project.

38. MacKay and Frederick, *Joseph Smith’s Seer Stones*, 127.

39. Wilford Woodruff, “Journal (January 1, 1841–December 31, 1842),” [133–34], February 19, 1842, Wilford Woodruff Papers, <https://wilfordwoodruffpapers.org/documents/a9d1a2cb-18fe-445d-a5e4-350caaf63442/page/46a50900-b577-4e5c-9fd9-6b2347845fc1>; Parley P. Pratt, “Editorial Remarks,” *Millennial Star* 3, no. 3 (July 1842): 47; M., “Correspondence of the Friends’ Weekly Intelligencer,” *Friends’ Weekly Intelligencer* 3, no. 27 (October 3, 1846): 211; Orson Pratt, in *Journal of Discourses*, 20:65 (August 25, 1878). One of Joseph Smith’s clerks in Nauvoo, Howard Coray, also remembered seeing the Prophet “translate by the Seer’s stone” but did not specify what he saw Joseph translate. Howard Coray to Martha Jane Lewis, August 2, 1889, MS 3047, Church History Catalog, <https://catalog.churchofjesuschrist.org/assets/becd2d14-e7co-4aa8-b70d-26861581916f/o/o?lang=eng>. Since Coray did not join the Church and become Joseph’s clerk until 1840, he could not have witnessed the translations of the Book of Mormon or the Bible. It would appear that, unless he meant he saw Joseph receive revelation by the seer stone, he witnessed Joseph on at least one occasion in Nauvoo translate a portion of the Egyptian papyri with the seer stone.

40. Smith, Heimburger, and Blythe, *Documents*, Volume 9, 204, 252–54.



FIGURE 16. Seer stone associated with Joseph Smith, long side view. Photograph by Welden C. Andersen and Richard E. Turley Jr. © Intellectual Reserve, Inc. Courtesy Church History Library, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.



FIGURE 17. Replica of Urim and Thummim by Brian Westover. Photograph by Daniel Smith. Courtesy Daniel Smith.

of Mormon.⁴¹ As with the early report in the *Cleveland Whig*, they too should be considered seriously but accepted cautiously. If Joseph did use a seer stone in the translation of the Book of Abraham, this would reinforce the point that the method of translation for the Prophet was unique.

Clues from the Book of Abraham text suggest that the Prophet felt free to continually adapt and revise his initial translation. For example, some of the names of the characters in the Book of Abraham were revised in 1842 shortly before its publication.⁴² Likewise, Joseph Smith's study of Hebrew appears to have also influenced the final form of the text, because his knowledge of such evidently influenced how he either initially rendered or later revised certain words and phrases in the Book of Abraham's creation account.⁴³ One of the glosses at the beginning of

41. The account in the *Friends' Weekly Intelligencer*, cited above, reads thus: "When Joseph was reading the papyrus, he closed his eyes, and held a hat over his face, and that the revelation came to him; and that where the papyrus was torn, he could read the parts that were destroyed equally as well as those that were there; and that scribes sat by him writing, as he expounded." The detail of Joseph placing his face into his hat to read the papyrus sounds much like how witnesses described the translation of the Book of Mormon, suggesting the possibility that the paper misreported or confused which text Lucy Mack Smith was describing. On the other hand, if the *Cleveland Whig* report is accurate and Joseph was indeed examining the papyrus with his seer stone, then perhaps Joseph's translation methods for the Book of Mormon and the Book of Abraham were more similar than previously supposed. Furthermore, at least two other sources also indicate that Joseph was able to read and translate portions of the papyrus that were damaged. One of these sources mentions how "Smith is to translate the whole by divine inspiration, and that which is lost, like Nebuchadnezzar's dream, can be interpreted as well as that which is preserved" (William S. West, *A Few Interesting Facts Respecting the Mormons* [n.p., 1837], 5), while the other speaks of how the Prophet "translated the characters on the roll, being favored with a 'special revelation' whenever any of the characters were missing by reason of mutilation of the roll" (Frederic G. Mather, "The Early Days of Mormonism," *Lippincott's Magazine of Popular Literature and Science* 2, no. 6 [August 1880]: 211). These accounts are in harmony with that published in the *Friends' Weekly Intelligencer* but must also be accepted cautiously since they are hearsay.

42. See "Zeptah and Egyptes," 101–6 herein.

43. See Grey, "Word of the Lord in the Original," 249–302; Matthew J. Grey, "Approaching Egyptian Papyri through Biblical Language: Joseph Smith's Use of Hebrew in His Translation of the Book of Abraham," in MacKay, Ashurst-McGee, and Hauglid, *Producing Ancient Scripture*, 390–451; and Kerry Muhlestein and Megan Hansen, "'The Work of Translating': The Book of Abraham's Translation Chronology," in *Let Us Reason Together: Essays in Honor of the Life's Work of Robert L. Millet*, ed. J. Spencer Fluhman and Brent L. Top (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book; Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center and Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, Brigham Young University, 2016), 149–53.

the book (“which signifies hieroglyphics”; Abr. 1:14) is not present in the Kirtland-era manuscripts, which appears to indicate that it came from Joseph Smith or one of his scribes at the time of the publication of the text.⁴⁴ Another gloss (“I will refer you to the representation at the commencement of this record”;⁴⁵ Abr. 1:12) was inserted interlineally, suggesting that “the references to the facsimiles within the text of the Book of Abraham seem to have been nineteenth-century editorial insertions,”⁴⁶ although this is not the only interpretation of this data point.⁴⁷ It should not come as a surprise that Joseph Smith (or his scribes) made revisions to the English text of the Book of Abraham and still called it a translation, since he also revised his revelations that comprise the Doctrine and Covenants and the Book of Mormon in subsequent editions after their initial publication.⁴⁸

Whatever Joseph’s precise method of scriptural translation, which he specified only as being “by the gift and power of God,” more important is what he produced. As Hugh Nibley recognized, “The Prophet has saved us the trouble of faulting his method by announcing in no uncertain terms that it is a method unique to himself depending entirely on divine revelation. That places the whole thing beyond the reach of direct examination and criticism but leaves wide open the really effective means of testing any method, which is by the results it produces.”⁴⁹ The results of Joseph Smith’s inspired translations are books of scripture that appear beyond his natural ability to produce.

A fuller grasp of this fascinating and important subject therefore includes appreciating how Joseph Smith and other early Latter-day

44. Jensen and Hauglid, *Revelations and Translations, Volume 4*, 334 n. 85.

45. Jensen and Hauglid, *Revelations and Translations, Volume 4*, 195, 239 n. 57.

46. Gee, *Introduction to the Book of Abraham*, 143.

47. For an alternative interpretation, see Muhlestein, “Assessing the Joseph Smith Papyri,” 29–32; Kerry Muhlestein, “The Explanation-Defying Book of Abraham,” in Hales, *Reason for Faith*, 82; and Kerry Muhlestein, “Egyptian Papyri and the Book of Abraham: A Faithful, Egyptological Point of View,” in *No Weapon Shall Prosper: New Light on Sensitive Issues*, ed. Robert L. Millet (Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2011), 225–26.

48. See Royal Skousen, “Changes in The Book of Mormon,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 11 (2014): 161–76; Marlin K. Jensen, “The Joseph Smith Papers: The Manuscript Revelation Books,” *Ensign* 39, no. 7 (July 2009): 47–51; and Robin Scott Jensen, Richard E. Turley Jr., and Riley M. Lorimer, eds., “Joseph Smith–Era Publications of Revelations,” in *Revelations and Translations, Volume 2: Published Revelations*, Joseph Smith Papers (Salt Lake City: Church Historian’s Press, 2011), xix–xxxvi.

49. Nibley, *Message of the Joseph Smith Papyri*, 63.

Saints used words such as “translation” and “revelation” in ways that are often similar but also sometimes different than how they are typically used today.⁵⁰

Further Reading

- Gee, John. “Joseph Smith and the Papyri.” In *An Introduction to the Book of Abraham*, 13–42. Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2017.
- Matthews, Robert J. “Joseph Smith—Translator.” In *Joseph Smith: The Prophet, The Man*, ed. Susan Easton Black and Charles D. Tate Jr., 77–87. Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 1993.
- Muhlestein, Kerry. “Book of Abraham, Translation Of.” In *The Pearl of Great Price Reference Companion*, ed. Dennis L. Largey, 63–69. Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2017.
- . “How Did Joseph Smith Translate the Book of Abraham?” and “What Is the Source of the Book of Abraham?” In *Let’s Talk about the Book of Abraham*, 52–73. Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2022.
- Nibley, Hugh. “Translated Correctly?” In *The Message of the Joseph Smith Papyri: An Egyptian Endowment*, 51–65. Salt Lake City: Deseret Book;

50. See, for example, Robert J. Matthews, “Joseph Smith—Translator,” in *Joseph Smith: The Prophet, The Man*, ed. Susan Easton Black and Charles D. Tate Jr. (Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 1993), 77–87; and Richard Lyman Bushman, “Joseph Smith as Translator,” in *Believing History: Latter-day Saint Essays*, ed. Reid L. Neilson and Jed Woodworth (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 233–47. Some recent authors have taken a different approach to understanding Joseph Smith’s conception of translation. Terryl Givens with Brian M. Hauglid, *The Pearl of Greatest Price: Mormonism’s Most Controversial Scripture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), 180–202; and Samuel Morris Brown, *Joseph Smith’s Translation: The Words and Worlds of Early Mormonism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020), 193–232, have sought to broaden the definition of “translation” in Joseph Smith’s parlance to effectively equate it with pure revelation, with the end result basically divorcing the text of the Book of Abraham, in this instance, from any relationship with a purported ancient manuscript. For a review and engagement with Givens’s work, see John S. Thompson, “‘We May Not Understand Our Words’: The Book of Abraham and the Concept of Translation in *The Pearl of Greatest Price*,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 41 (2020): 1–48. Along similar lines, Michael Hubbard MacKay, “The Secular Binary of Joseph Smith’s Translations,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 54, no. 3 (Fall 2021): 1–39, has written on what he sees is the “incommensurability” of translation in Joseph Smith’s thinking, meaning the process of translation ultimately remains inaccessible and indescribable by conventional means and thereby eludes our full understanding.

Provo, Utah: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, Brigham Young University, 2005.

Smoot, Stephen O. “Did Joseph Smith Use a Seer Stone in the Translation of the Book of Abraham?” *Religious Educator* 23, no. 2 (2022): 65–107.

Thompson, John S. “‘We May Not Understand Our Words’: The Book of Abraham and the Concept of Translation in *The Pearl of Greatest Price*.” *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 41 (2020): 1–48.

1

10. character

1 E This is called Zakhon hikh, or Chal-dixon hikh. This character is in the fifth degree, independent and arbitrary. It may be increased in the fifth degree while it stands independent and arbitrary. That is without a straight mark inserted above or below it. By inserting a straight mark above it thus (2) it increases its signification five degrees: by inserting two straight lines, thus (3) its signification is increased five times more. By inserting three straight lines thus (4) its signification is again increased five times more than the last. By counting the number of straight lines and preserving them, or considering them as qualifying adjectives we have the degrees of comparison. There are five connecting parts of speech in the above character, called Zakhon hikh. These five connecting parts of speech, for verbs, participles, prepositions, conjunctions, and adverbs. In translating this character, the subject must be continued until there are as many of these connecting parts of speech used as there are connections or connecting points found in the character. But whenever the character is found with one horizontal line, as (2) the subject must be continued until ~~twice~~ ^{five times} the number of connecting parts of speech are used; or, the full sense of the writer is not conveyed. When two horizontal lines occur, the number of connecting parts of speech are continued five times further or five degrees. And when three horizontal lines are found, the number of connections are to be increased five times further. The character alone has 5 parts of speech: increase by one straight line thus 5 x 5 is 25

2 E

3 E

4 E

FIGURE 18. Grammar and Alphabet of the Egyptian Language, ca. July–ca. November 1835. © Intellectual Reserve, Inc. Courtesy Church History Library, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

The “Kirtland Egyptian Papers” and the Book of Abraham

Associated with the translation of the Book of Abraham is a collection of documents commonly known today as the “Kirtland Egyptian Papers.”¹ This name was coined by Hugh Nibley in the early 1970s to describe a corpus of manuscripts that can be classified into, broadly, two categories: Book of Abraham manuscripts and Egyptian-language manuscripts (or manuscripts that “focus on alphabet and grammar material that the authors connected to the ancient Egyptian language”).² Because some of these documents postdate the Kirtland period of Latter-day Saint history, and because the name coined by Nibley to describe this corpus is somewhat vague, the name has fallen out of general use among scholars, who prefer more precise classifications. Regardless of what people today call them, “the[se] name designations are modern ones and typically reflect assumptions of the individuals using the particular designations. No [single] designation [to describe these texts] has gained wide acceptance.”³

The Book of Abraham manuscripts among the Kirtland Egyptian Papers contain multiple copies of the extant English text of the Book of Abraham. These manuscripts date from mid-1835 to early 1842 and are in

1. Hugh Nibley, “The Meaning of the Kirtland Egyptian Papers,” *BYU Studies* 11, no. 4 (Summer 1971): 350–99, 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), 502–68.

2. Brian M. Hauglid, “The Book of Abraham and the Egyptian Project: ‘A Knowledge of Hidden Languages,’” in *Approaching Antiquity: Joseph Smith and the Ancient World*, ed. Lincoln H. Blumell, Matthew J. Grey, and Andrew H. Hedges (Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2015), 474–79, quote at 477.

3. John Gee, *An Introduction to the Book of Abraham* (Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2017), 32–33.

the handwriting of W. W. Phelps, Warren Parrish, Frederick G. Williams, and Willard Richards.⁴ The Egyptian-language manuscripts comprise an assortment of documents, some of which contain transcriptions of portions of the characters from the Egyptian papyri and associate them with English words and phrases, including passages from the Book of Abraham. These documents are in the handwriting of W. W. Phelps, Joseph Smith, Oliver Cowdery, Frederick G. Williams, and Warren Parrish.⁵ While these two groups can be broadly distinguished, “it should also be understood that the Abraham documents contain a certain amount of Egyptian material and the Egyptian papers include a certain amount of Abraham material.”⁶ Because of this, it is clear that there is some kind of relationship between these two groups, though the nature of that relationship is not entirely clear.

Because of conflicting interpretations of the historical data among scholars, the meaning, purpose, and significance of these documents is disputed. Even some basic details about this corpus remain disputed. This includes “their authorship, their date, their purpose, their relationship with the Book of Abraham, their relationship with the Joseph Smith Papyri, their relationship with each other, what the documents are or were intended to be, and even whether the documents form a discrete or coherent group.”⁷ This uncertainty has unfortunately resulted in a lack of consensus on how to understand this collection.

The Egyptian-language documents among the Kirtland Egyptian Papers can be plausibly viewed as a sincere but misguided attempt by those involved to understand the Egyptian language in conjunction with the divinely revealed translation of the Book of Abraham. As with other “efforts of the time to unravel the mysteries of the Egyptian language, these attempts are considered by modern Egyptologists—both Latter-day Saints and others—to be of no actual value in understanding [the] Egyptian” language.⁸ Because of this, some have attempted to use the Egyptian-language documents to cast doubt on Joseph Smith’s

4. Hauglid, “Book of Abraham and the Egyptian Project,” 477–78; Gee, *Introduction to the Book of Abraham*, 34–35.

5. Hauglid, “Book of Abraham and the Egyptian Project,” 478; Gee, *Introduction to the Book of Abraham*, 34–35. The Book of Abraham manuscripts and related Egyptian-language documents can be viewed online at the Joseph Smith Papers website at <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/the-papers/revelations-and-translations/jsppr6>.

6. Hauglid, “Book of Abraham and the Egyptian Project,” 477.

7. Gee, *Introduction to the Book of Abraham*, 33.

8. 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), xxv.

prophetic inspiration or the authenticity of the Book of Abraham. These efforts, however, are highly questionable for a number of reasons and generally demonstrate an exercise in religious polemics rather than critical scholarship.

First, the simple fact is that “the extent of Joseph Smith’s involvement in the creation of these manuscripts is unknown.”⁹ It is true that he had some involvement in the project since his handwriting appears in one manuscript, and his signature on another.¹⁰ His manuscript history also contains a reference to his involvement with the project: “The remainder of this month [July 1835], I was continually engaged in translating an alphabet to the Book of Abraham, and arrangeing [*sic*] a grammar of the Egyptian language as practiced by the ancients.”¹¹ However, this is insufficient reason to conclude that Joseph Smith was the *primary* agent behind the effort to create the Egyptian-language documents.¹²

9. Jensen and Hauglid, *Revelations and Translations, Volume 4*, xv.

10. Jensen and Hauglid, *Revelations and Translations, Volume 4*, xv; Gee, *Introduction to the Book of Abraham*, 34.

11. “History, 1838–1856, Volume B-1 [1 September 1834–2 November 1838],” 597, Joseph Smith Papers, February 2, 2023, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/history-1838-1856-volume-b-1-1-september-1834-2-november-1838/51>.

12. For one thing, although this entry in Joseph Smith’s manuscript history is dated to July 1835 and written as though it comes directly from the Prophet, this comment is, in fact, a retrospective entry that was composed and inserted into the history by clerk Willard Richards no earlier than September 1843. Indeed, it could be that the entry comes not from Joseph Smith at all, but rather from his ghostwriter W. W. Phelps (compare Samuel Brown, “The Translator and the Ghostwriter: Joseph Smith and W. W. Phelps,” *Journal of Mormon History* 34, no. 1 [2008]: 26–62), in whose hand the “Grammar and Alphabet of the Egyptian Language” (GAEL) volume is composed (see “Grammar and Alphabet of the English Language, circa July–circa November 1835,” Joseph Smith Papers, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/grammar-and-alphabet-of-the-egyptian-language-circa-july-circa-november-1835/7>). It must also not be forgotten that “although various people acted as scribe to Joseph Smith, they were independent people and had their own independent thoughts. Not everything written by one of Joseph Smith’s scribes came from the mind of Joseph Smith, even during the time period when they served as Joseph Smith’s scribes.” John Gee, “Joseph Smith and Ancient Egypt,” in Blumell, Grey, and Hedges, *Approaching Antiquity*, 437. A cryptic note in Joseph Smith’s Nauvoo-era journal further complicates matters. An entry dated November 15, 1843, reads, “P.M. at the office. Suggested the Idea of preparing a grammar of the Egyptian Language.” Andrew H. Hedges, Alex D. Smith, and Brent M. Rogers, eds., *Journals, Volume 3: May 1843–June 1844*, Joseph Smith Papers (Salt Lake City: Church Historian’s Press, 2015), 130. What could this mean? Possibilities include, but are not limited to, either that the Prophet wanted to do further work on the GAEL, assuming he participated in its production, that he wanted to prepare the same for publication, or that he did not agree with the content of the GAEL and wanted to undertake an entirely different approach. See Hedges, Smith, and Rogers, eds., *Journals, Volume 3*, 130

Second, it remains as yet “unclear when in 1835 Joseph Smith began creating the existing Book of Abraham manuscripts or what relationship the Book of Abraham manuscripts have to the Egyptian-language documents.”¹³

Third, while “considerable overlap of themes exists between the Book of Abraham and the Egyptian-language documents, . . . most of the Book of Abraham is not textually dependent on any of the extant Egyptian-language documents. The inverse is also true: most of the content in the Egyptian-language documents is independent of the Book of Abraham.”¹⁴

Fourth, and finally, the Egyptian-language documents were never presented as authoritative revelation. “What emerges most clearly from a closer look at the Kirtland Egyptian Papers,” observed Nibley in his pioneering study, “is the fact that there is nothing official or final about them—they are fluid, exploratory, confidential, and hence free of any possibility or intention of fraud or deception.”¹⁵ With this in mind, the Egyptian-language documents might be understood as part of “an interest in ancient languages within the early church and an anticipation that additional ancient texts would be revealed.”¹⁶ This interest prompted Joseph Smith and those close to him to attempt a secular study of other ancient languages such as Hebrew and Greek,¹⁷ and the Egyptian-language project could perhaps be situated in this same context.

There is still much that we do not know about the Kirtland Egyptian Papers, including the precise circumstances surrounding their creation and purpose. While their ultimate nature remains debated, recent scholarship has called into question older assumptions and arguments about the extent of Joseph Smith’s participation in the Egyptian-language

n. 576; and Gee, *Introduction to the Book of Abraham*, 37. In any case, it complicates how to understand Joseph Smith’s role in the composition of the Kirtland-era Egyptian language GAEL document.

13. Jensen and Hauglid, *Revelations and Translations, Volume 4*, xxv. For different arguments on the direction of the dependency between the Book of Abraham and the Egyptian-language documents, see Hauglid, “Book of Abraham and the Egyptian Project,” 474–511; and Kerry Muhlestein, “Assessing the Joseph Smith Papyri: An Introduction to the Historiography of Their Acquisitions, Translations, and Interpretations,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 22 (2016): 33–37.

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

15. Nibley, “Meaning of the Kirtland Egyptian Papers,” 399.

16. Jensen and Hauglid, *Revelations and Translations, Volume 4*, xxi.

17. See Matthew J. Grey, “‘The Word of the Lord in the Original’: Joseph Smith’s Study of Hebrew in Kirtland,” in Blumell, Grey, and Hedges, *Approaching Antiquity*, 249–302; and John W. Welch, “Joseph Smith’s Awareness of Greek and Latin,” in Blumell, Grey, and Hedges, *Approaching Antiquity*, 303–28.

project and the Book of Abraham’s dependency on these manuscripts.¹⁸ In the meantime, what can be safely concluded is that “although we have incomplete information on exactly how the Book of Abraham was translated, the resulting contents of that translation are more important than the process itself.”¹⁹

Further Reading

- Gee, John. “Joseph Smith and the Papyri.” In *An Introduction to the Book of Abraham*, 13–42. Salt Lake City: Deseret Book; Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 2017.
- Hauglid, Brian M. “The Book of Abraham and the Egyptian Project: ‘A Knowledge of Hidden Languages.’” In *Approaching Antiquity: Joseph Smith and the Ancient World*, edited by Lincoln H. Blumell, Matthew J. Grey, and Andrew H. Hedges, 474–511. Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2015.
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18. See, for example, John Gee, “Prolegomena to a Study of the Egyptian Alphabet Documents in the Joseph Smith Papers,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 42 (2021): 77–98.

19. Gee, *Introduction to the Book of Abraham*, 39.

The Relationship between the Book of Abraham and the Joseph Smith Papyri

It is clear that Joseph Smith's inspired translation of the Book of Abraham was connected to the Egyptian papyri he acquired in summer 1835. However, less clear is the precise relationship between the Book of Abraham text and the papyri. "Several theories posit ways in which the Book of Abraham text relates to the papyri. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints maintains that Joseph Smith translated the Book of Abraham from papyri, but they do not specify which papyri. Theories about the relationship may be categorized under three heads: Joseph Smith produced the Book of Abraham (1) from the fragments of papyri that we still have, (2) from papyri that we no longer have, or (3) without the aid of any of the Joseph Smith Papyri."¹

Exploring these theories individually reveals that while they each have some evidence for them, "not all of the theories account equally for the historical evidence. It is [also] worth knowing some of the problems associated with the various theories. Whichever theory one chooses to follow, one must be prepared to deal with the problems posed by the evidence that the theory cannot account for."²

Theory 1: Joseph Smith translated the Book of Abraham from the extant papyri fragments.

The proponents of this theory maintain that Joseph Smith either pretended to translate or mistakenly thought he was translating the Book of Abraham from the surviving fragments of the Hor Book of Breathings

1. John Gee, *An Introduction to the Book of Abraham* (Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2017), 83.

2. Gee, *Introduction to the Book of Abraham*, 84.

(P. Joseph Smith I, XI+X).³ The two main pieces of evidence cited by proponents of this theory are (1) the hieratic Egyptian characters from the Book of Breathings (P. Joseph Smith XI) that appear in the margins of the early Book of Abraham manuscripts and (2) the proximity of the original vignette for Facsimile 1 at the beginning of the Hor Book of Breathings and the apparent reference to this illustration in the Book of Abraham text claiming it is “at the commencement of this record” (Abr. 1:12, 14).⁴ At first glance, these two pieces of evidence may appear persuasive, but other scholars have disputed their explanatory power in connecting the English text of the Book of Abraham to the text in the surviving fragments.

For example, there is evidence that casts doubt on whether any of the existing Book of Abraham manuscripts is the original manuscript. With respect to the extant manuscript copies of the Book of Abraham, it is not clear who placed the hieratic characters from the Book of Breathings in the margins or when they were added. It is also not clear what the scribe was thinking when he added the characters. It has been widely assumed that they were copied at Joseph Smith’s direct prompting during the process of translation, but this is not certain.⁵

3. Grant S. Heward and Jerald Tanner, “The Source of the Book of Abraham Identified,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 3, no. 2 (Summer 1968): 92–99; Christopher C. Smith, “‘That Which Is Lost’: Assessing the State of Preservation of the Joseph Smith Papyri,” *John Whitmer Historical Association Journal* 31, no. 1 (Spring/Summer 2011): 69–83; Brian M. Hauglid, “The Book of Abraham and the Egyptian Project: A Knowledge of Hidden Languages,” in *Approaching Antiquity: Joseph Smith and the Ancient World*, ed. Lincoln H. Blumell, Matthew J. Grey, and Andrew H. Hedges (Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2015), 474–511; Terryl Givens with Brian M. Hauglid, *The Pearl of Greatest Price: Mormonism’s Most Controversial Scripture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), 109–222. Latter-day Saints who accept this theory tend to separate what they see as the inspired revelation Joseph Smith received that produced the text of the Book of Abraham with his mistaken assumption about the source of that text. In this way of thinking, the Prophet’s divine inspiration must be compartmentalized with his own natural assumptions, which may or may not be true.

4. Heward and Tanner, “Source of the Book of Abraham Identified,” 92–99; Smith, “‘That Which Is Lost,’” 73.

5. See the discussion in Kerry Muhlestein, “Assessing the Joseph Smith Papyri: An Introduction to the Historiography of Their Acquisitions, Translations, and Interpretations,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 22 (2016): 32–36; Kerry Muhlestein, “The Explanation-Defying Book of Abraham,” in *A Reason for Faith: Navigating LDS Doctrine and Church History*, ed. Laura Harris Hales (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book; Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 2016), 81–82, 84–85; and Kerry Muhlestein, “Egyptian Papyri and the Book of Abraham: A Faithful, Egyptological Point of View,” in *No Weapon Shall Prosper: New Light*

“Though the juxtaposition of the characters and Book of Abraham text implies a relationship between the two, the exact nature of that relationship is not stated” and is complicated by the evidence that the manuscripts which bear these marginal characters appear to be copies of an earlier text that is no longer extant.⁶ Any assumed relationship between the two remains an assumption.

The second point of evidence (the reference to Facsimile 1 at Abr. 1:12, 14) is likewise more complicated than is often supposed. For starters, scholars have recognized that the last line of Abraham 1:12 (“I will refer you to the representation at the commencement of this record”) and all of Abraham 1:14 (“That you may have an understanding of these gods, I have given you the fashion of them in the figures at the beginning, which manner of figures is called by the Chaldeans Rahleenos, which signifies hieroglyphics”) are interlinear insertions in the earliest manuscript copy of the Book of Abraham.⁷ Even if one assumes these references were original and not added later, this does not fully explain what these verses mean. While the text does seem to say that the vignette is adjacent to it, it could, alternatively, be read as indicating “that the vignette depicting the altar and idols is not adjacent to the text but some distance from it.”⁸ A phrase such as “at the beginning” or “at the commencement” could be referring to something one sentence or ten paragraphs away.

Theory 2: Joseph Smith translated the Book of Abraham from a missing papyrus fragment.

This theory has gained traction as scholars have looked more closely at nineteenth-century eyewitness descriptions of the papyrus believed to be the source of the Book of Abraham. “The nineteenth-century eyewitnesses, both Mormon and non-Mormon, favorable and hostile to the Church, agree that the Book of Abraham was translated from a long roll of papyrus that was still a long roll in the 1840s and 1850s. The current fragments of the Joseph Smith Papyri, however, were all mounted on heavy paper and placed in glass frames in 1837. None of them can

on *Sensitive Issues*, ed. Robert L. Millet (Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2011), 228–29.

6. Brent M. Rogers and others, eds., *Documents, Volume 5: October 1835–January 1838*, Joseph Smith Papers (Salt Lake City: Church Historian’s Press, 2017), 74–75.

7. Gee, *Introduction to the Book of Abraham*, 143; Rogers and others, *Documents, Volume 5*, 78; Jensen and Hauglid, *Revelations and Translations, Volume 4*, 195–96, 239 nn. 57, 64.

8. Muhlestein, “Assessing the Joseph Smith Papyri,” 29–32, quote at 30; compare Muhlestein, “Egyptian Papyri and the Book of Abraham,” 225–26.

be the long roll described in the 1840s and 1850s. So these fragments are specifically not the source of the Book of Abraham according to the eyewitnesses.”⁹

The main advantage to this theory is that it can better account for the nineteenth-century eyewitness evidence. It also answers the objections raised by those who rightly point out that none of the surviving Joseph Smith Papyri fragments translate as the Book of Abraham. However, this theory has been criticized on the grounds that while there are indeed missing portions of papyri (for example, Facsimiles 2 and 3 are no longer extant), it is questionable whether there is enough missing papyrus to accommodate a hypothetical Book of Abraham text.¹⁰ In addition, even though “this theory accounts for [the eyewitness] evidence,” it is still “frustrating to many people. Because the papyri are no longer extant, there is no possible way to check Joseph Smith’s translation of the Book of Abraham.”¹¹

Theory 3: Joseph Smith translated the Book of Abraham by revelation but not from the papyri he possessed.

This theory argues that the Book of Abraham was not on the papyri that Joseph Smith possessed but that he translated it merely by pondering over the papyri. As an essay published by the Church recently articulated,

Joseph’s study of the papyri may have led to a revelation about key events and teachings in the life of Abraham, much as he had earlier received a

9. Gee, *Introduction to the Book of Abraham*, 85, and also 4–5; compare John Gee, “Eyewitness, Hearsay, and Physical Evidence of the Joseph Smith Papyri,” in *The Disciple as Witness: Essays on Latter-day Saint History and Doctrine in Honor of Richard Lloyd Anderson*, ed. Stephen D. Ricks, Donald W. Parry, and Andrew H. Hedges (Provo, Utah: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 2000), 175–217; Kerry Muhlestein, “Papyri and Presumptions: A Careful Examination of the Eyewitness Accounts Associated with the Joseph Smith Papyri,” *Journal of Mormon History* 42, no. 4 (October 2016): 31–50.

10. One of the main points of contention is whether it can be mathematically calculated how much papyrus is currently missing and what was potentially contained on the missing portion. For different arguments, see John Gee, “Some Puzzles from the Joseph Smith Papyri,” *FARMS Review* 20, no. 1 (2008): 117–23; Andrew W. Cook and Christopher C. Smith, “The Original Length of the Scroll of Hôr,” *Dialogue* 43, no. 4 (2010): 1–42; John Gee, “Formulas and Faith,” *Journal of the Book of Mormon and Other Restoration Scripture* 21, no. 1 (2012): 60–65; Smith, “That Which Is Lost,” 69–83; and Muhlestein, “Papyri and Presumptions,” 31–50. See also the cautionary remarks in Eshbal Ratzon and Nachum Dershowitz, “The Length of a Scroll: Quantitative Evaluation of Material Reconstructions,” *PLOS One* 15, no. 10 (2020): 1–26.

11. Gee, *Introduction to the Book of Abraham*, 85.

revelation about the life of Moses while studying the Bible. This view assumes a broader definition of the words *translator* and *translation*. According to this view, Joseph's translation was not a literal rendering of the papyri as a conventional translation would be. Rather, the physical artifacts provided an occasion for meditation, reflection, and revelation. They catalyzed a process whereby God gave to Joseph Smith a revelation about the life of Abraham, even if that revelation did not directly correlate to the characters on the papyri.¹²

Those who adopt this theory urge Latter-day Saints to reconsider the scope and mechanism of "translation" in Joseph Smith's teachings and scriptural productions.¹³ The strength of this theory is that it is consistent with some of the Prophet's other scriptural productions. "One advantage is that in Doctrine and Covenants section 7, Joseph Smith translated an ancient papyrus that he never had in his possession; hence, there is a precedent for Joseph Smith translating a papyrus that was not in his possession, and so there is no reason to suppose that he had to have the papyrus of the Book of Abraham in his possession either."¹⁴ At the same time, however, the main drawback to this theory is that Joseph Smith himself believed that he possessed a physical record of Abraham and claimed when he published the text that it was a "translation of some ancient records . . . upon papyrus."¹⁵

It could be argued that some of these (and other) theories might be combined to form new paradigms. "As scholars continue to find, research, and analyze the evidence that bears on this subject, future studies will undoubtedly illuminate other theories that have not yet been conceived."¹⁶ Since The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints has not taken an official stance on how the translation of the Book of

12. "Translation and Historicity of the Book of Abraham," Gospel Topics Essays, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, accessed January 10, 2023, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/manual/gospel-topics-essays/translation-and-historicity-of-the-book-of-abraham>.

13. See Karl C. Sandberg, "Knowing Brother Joseph Again: The Book of Abraham, and Joseph Smith as Translator," *Dialogue* 22, no. 4 (Winter 1989): 17–38; Samuel Morris Brown, *Joseph Smith's Translation: The Words and Worlds of Early Mormonism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020), 193–232.

14. Gee, *Introduction to the Book of Abraham*, 85.

15. "Book of Abraham," *Times and Seasons* 3, no. 9 (March 1, 1842): 704; Gee, *Introduction to the Book of Abraham*, 85–86.

16. Kerry Muhlestein, "Joseph Smith and Egyptian Artifacts: A Model for Evaluating the Prophetic Nature of the Prophet's Ideas about the Ancient World," *BYU Studies Quarterly* 55, no. 3 (2016): 67.

Abraham was accomplished other than it was done by revelation, and since the evidence is not as clear or as complete as we might like, it would perhaps be wisest for readers to worry less about the method of the translation and more about the results.

Further Reading

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Muhlestein, Kerry. "The Explanation-Defying Book of Abraham." In *A Reason for Faith: Navigating LDS Doctrine and Church History*, edited by Laura Harris Hales, 79–91. Salt Lake City: Deseret Book; Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 2016.

———. "Joseph Smith and Egyptian Artifacts: A Model for Evaluating the Prophetic Nature of the Prophet's Ideas about the Ancient World." *BYU Studies Quarterly* 55, no. 3 (2016): 35–82.

The Priesthood Ban and the Book of Abraham

The Book of Abraham preserves an account of the founding of Egypt (Abr. 1:23–27) and mentions the origins of a “curse in the land” (v. 24) pertaining to the priesthood among the descendants of Ham. “The land of Egypt,” the text says, was “first discovered by a woman, who was the daughter of Ham, and the daughter of Egyptus” (v. 23). According to this account, “when this woman discovered the land 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” (v. 24). Before the text can clarify what exactly this curse might be, it goes on to explain how the effects of this curse were transmitted by the descendants of this Egyptus. “Now the first government of Egypt was established by Pharaoh, the eldest son of Egyptus, the daughter of Ham, and it was after the manner of the government of Ham, which was patriarchal” (v. 25), the account continues. Although Pharaoh was “a righteous man” who “established his kingdom and judged his people wisely and justly all his days” and who sought “earnestly to imitate that order established by the fathers in the first generations,” he was nevertheless “cursed” as “pertaining to the Priesthood” (v. 26), since he was “of that lineage by which he could not have the right of Priesthood, notwithstanding the Pharaohs would fain claim it from Noah, through Ham” (v. 27). This claim, Abraham explains in his account, is why his “father was led away by their idolatry” (v. 27).

This account expands on some of the details found in Genesis 9:18–29, one of the most enigmatic passages of scripture. In the biblical story, Ham, the son of Noah, saw his father “drunken and . . . uncovered within his tent” (v. 21). When Ham informed his brothers Shem and Japheth of their father’s condition, the latter two “took a garment, and laid it upon both their shoulders, and went backward, and covered the nakedness of their father; and their faces were backward, and they saw not their

father's nakedness" (v. 23). Upon awaking, Noah "knew what his younger son had done" (v. 24) and so, in language similar to the Book of Abraham, "cursed" his grandson Canaan, the son of Ham, to be "a servant of servants . . . unto his brethren" (v. 25). Precisely what Ham had done that warranted Noah's reprimand is unclear in the text. It is also unclear why in the biblical account only Canaan was cursed among Ham's children.¹

The true significance and meaning of this account continues to be debated among biblical exegetes, although a common reading of this passage sees it as an etiology that "provide[s] a biblical justification for the subsequent dispossession and oppression of the indigenous Canaanite population in Palestine by the people of Israel."² Even though the Prophet Joseph Smith is known to have commented on this passage on at least one occasion, nothing preserved in available records offers much clarification.³

What is clear is that the curse of Ham in Genesis 9—along with details about the descendants of Ham in the so-called Table of Nations in Genesis 10:6–20—has historically been (mis)read to justify the enslavement of people of African descent.⁴ By Joseph Smith's day, this racialized reading of Genesis 9—which had circulated and evolved among Jews,

1. The Book of Abraham, as seen above, suggests that others among Ham's descendants were also cursed, a detail missing from the biblical version.

2. Gale A. Yee, Hugh R. Page Jr., and Matthew J. M. Coomber, eds., *The Pentateuch: Fortress Commentary on the Bible, Study Edition* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2016), 101. Compare E. A. Speiser, *The Anchor Bible: Genesis* (New York: Doubleday, 1962), 62, who notices the puzzling gaps in this story but ultimately sees it as attempting to "stigmatize distasteful practices on the part of the older inhabitants of the land" of Palestine (that is, the Canaanites).

3. Wilford Woodruff recorded that in a discourse delivered on November 7, 1841, Joseph Smith "spoke of the curse of ham for laughing at Noah while in his wine but doing no harm." Woodruff, unfortunately, did not note the particulars of what the Prophet meant with these remarks. See "Discourse, 7 November 1841, as Reported by Wilford Woodruff," [109], Joseph Smith Papers, accessed January 10, 2023, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/discourse-7november-1841-as-reported-by-wilford-woodruff/1>.

4. Stephen R. Haynes, *Noah's Curse: The Biblical Justification of American Slavery* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002); David M. Goldenberg, *The Curse of Ham: Race and Slavery in Early Judaism, Christianity, and Islam* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2003); David M. Whitford, *The Curse of Ham in the Early Modern Era: The Bible and the Justifications for Slavery* (New York: Routledge, 2009); David M. Goldenberg, *Black and Slave: The Origins and History of the Curse of Ham* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2017). Edwin M. Yamauchi, *Africa and the Bible* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2004), 19–33, summarizes much of this scholarship but provides a selective and somewhat garbled accounting of the Book of Abraham and the priesthood ban.

Christians, and Muslims for several centuries—had become commonplace. At one point, the Prophet himself appeared to accept this reasoning for the enslavement of Blacks in the United States,⁵ although it is not clear how much this reflected his personal belief as much as it was a pragmatic attempt to distance Latter-day Saints from abolitionism, which was still a radical political ideology in the early nineteenth century.⁶ In any case, Joseph’s views on slavery would ultimately develop into a position of gradual emancipation. This stance was even made a plank of his 1844 presidential platform.⁷

Whatever Joseph Smith believed about slavery or its justification in light of Genesis 9, there is “no contemporary evidence” that he appealed to the Book of Abraham for his racial ideas.⁸ This included his thinking on the ordination of Black men to the priesthood. As one scholar put it plainly, “even though Joseph Smith produced the Book of Abraham, he never used it to justify a priesthood restriction.”⁹ As has been abundantly documented, at least two Black men were ordained to the priesthood in Joseph Smith’s lifetime.¹⁰ Current historical evidence seems to indicate that it was only after the Prophet’s death that a ban on ordaining Black men to the priesthood and allowing Black men and women to receive temple ordinances was imposed by Brigham Young.¹¹ Despite

5. Joseph Smith, “For the Messenger and Advocate,” *Latter Day Saints’ Messenger and Advocate* 2, no. 7 (April 1836): 289.

6. Richard Lyman Bushman with Jed Woodworth, *Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2005), 289; Russell W. Stevenson, *For the Cause of Righteousness: A Global History of Blacks and Mormonism, 1830–2013* (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2014), 212; W. Paul Reeve, *Religion of a Different Color: Race and the Mormon Struggle for Whiteness* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 123–25; Max Perry Mueller, *Race and the Making of the Mormon People* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2017), 96–97.

7. Bushman, *Joseph Smith*, 289; Stevenson, *For the Cause of Righteousness*, 9; Mueller, *Race and the Making of the Mormon People*, 107; Reeve, *Religion of a Different Color*, 127; Spencer W. McBride, *Joseph Smith for President: The Prophet, the Assassins, and the Fight for American Religious Freedom* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021), 98–100, 127–28.

8. Matthew L. Harris and Newell G. Bringhurst, eds., *The Mormon Church and Blacks: A Documentary History* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2015), 12–13, emphasis in original. Mueller, *Race and the Making of the Mormon People*, 116, likewise affirms, “There is no evidence that during his lifetime Smith or any of his followers cited the book of Abraham to deny black Mormon men the priesthood.”

9. W. Paul Reeve, “Race, the Priesthood, and Temples,” in *A Reason for Faith: Navigating LDS Doctrine and Church History*, ed. Laura Harris Hales (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book; Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 2016), 160.

10. Stevenson, *For the Cause of Righteousness*, 10, 210–12, 229–31; Reeve, *Religion of a Different Color*, 109, 131, 295 n. 16; Reeve, “Race, the Priesthood, and Temples,” 160.

11. Stevenson, *For the Cause of Righteousness*, 13–35.

this, however, “through three decades of discourses, Brigham Young never attributed the policy of priesthood denial to Joseph Smith, nor did he cite the Prophet’s translation of the book of Abraham in support of this doctrine.”¹² This is significant, since if the Book of Abraham was simply the product of the racist environment and thinking of Joseph Smith and his contemporaries, as some have alleged,¹³ then it is deeply curious why neither he nor his immediate successor ever appeared to use it to justify their positions on slavery (either pro or con) or the priesthood and temple ban. The “concern in the first chapter” of the Book of Abraham, Joseph Smith’s premier biographer has observed, “was with civilizations and lineage more than race. Pharaoh, Ham, and Egyptus figure in one lineage and Abraham in another. The implications for modern race relations interested Joseph less than the configuration of family lines and the descent of authority.”¹⁴

If neither Joseph Smith nor Brigham Young ever invoked the Book of Abraham to address questions about slavery or the ordination of Blacks to the priesthood, then whence did this practice arise? “Very simply,” wrote scholar Lester Bush in a pioneering study, “the basic belief that a lineage could be traced from Cain through the wife of Ham to the modern [Black person] had long been accepted by the Church, independently of the Pearl of Great Price.”¹⁵ By 1847, Brigham Young and other Church leaders began formulating and implementing their views on why Blacks could not hold the priesthood.¹⁶ Apostle Parley P. Pratt, for example, echoed the language of (but did not explicitly cite) the Book of Abraham in an April 1847 discourse when he spoke of Blacks being “cursed as regards [to] the priesthood.”¹⁷ His brother and fellow Apostle Orson Pratt followed suit in 1853.¹⁸

12. Lester E. Bush, “Mormonism’s Negro Doctrine: An Historical Overview,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 8, no. 1 (Spring 1973): 31.

13. Fawn M. Brodie, *No Man Knows My History: The Life of Joseph Smith*, 2nd rev. ed. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1973), 172–173; Ryan Stuart Bingham, “Curses and Marks: Racial Dispensations and Dispensations of Race in Joseph Smith’s Bible Revision and the Book of Abraham,” *Journal of Mormon History* 41, no. 3 (July 2015): 22–57.

14. Bushman, *Joseph Smith*, 289.

15. Bush, “Mormonism’s Negro Doctrine,” 35.

16. Stevenson, *For the Cause of Righteousness*, 13–36; Reeve, “Race, the Priesthood, and Temples,” 164–67.

17. Parley P. Pratt, “Sunday Meeting Minutes, Winter Quarters,” April 25, 1847, [3], CR 100 318, Church History Catalog, <https://catalog.churchofjesuschrist.org/assets/ba16277a-77b9-4784-a788-68ac368cof18/o/2>.

18. Orson Pratt, “The Pre-existence of Man (Continued),” *The Seer* 1, no. 4 (April 1853): 56.

Available evidence suggests that it was not until the 1880s with the canonization of the Pearl of Great Price that Latter-day Saints began explicitly using the Book of Abraham as the “scriptural linchpin of black exclusion from the priesthood and the temple” under the misinterpretation that Black people were Ham’s cursed seed.¹⁹ Although earlier expounders certainly may have had the Book of Abraham in mind with some of their racial thinking,²⁰ it would not be until some decades later with influential writers such as John Taylor and B. H. Roberts that this reading was made overt.²¹ By the turn of the century, this reading had become the de facto “official” understanding.²² As Lester Bush explained,

When fully developed the Pearl of Great Price argument went as follows: Cain became black after murdering his brother Abel; among his descendants were a people of Canaan who warred on their neighbors, and were also identified as black. Ham, Noah’s son, married Egyptus, a descendant of this Cain-Canaan lineage; Cain’s descendants had been denied the priesthood, and thus Ham’s descendants were also denied the priesthood; this was confirmed in the case of Pharaoh, a descendant of Ham and Egyptus, and of the Canaanites, and who was denied the priesthood; the modern [person of African descent] was of this Cain-Ham lineage, and therefore was not eligible for the priesthood.²³

Although the Book of Abraham would later be used to justify this narrative, as scholars have paid closer attention to the text it has become clearer that this reading is deeply problematic.²⁴ In fact, despite what

19. Mueller, *Race and the Making of the Mormon People*, 117.

20. Besides the Pratts, as cited above, Orson Hyde, in an 1845 speech, spoke of “the negro or African race” being “the accursed lineage of Canaan.” But Hyde did not cite the Book of Abraham in this speech, nor did he identify Blacks as being barred from priesthood office. Furthermore, he couched his comments in the context of the supposed lack of valiance among Blacks in the pre-existence. Orson Hyde, *Speech of Elder Orson Hyde: Delivered before the High Priests Quorum in Nauvoo, April 27th, 1845* (Nauvoo, Ill.: John Taylor, 1845), 30. That Hyde derived his ideas on the behavior of Blacks in the pre-existence from the Book of Abraham, which contains the most explicit details in Latter-day Saint scripture on this topic (Abr. 3:22–28), seems likely but remains an assumption.

21. John Taylor, in *Journal of Discourses*, 26 vols. (Liverpool: F. D. Richards, 1855–86), 21:370 (August 8, 1880); B. H. Roberts, “To the Youth of Israel,” *Contributor* 6, no. 8 (May 1885): 296–97.

22. Bush, “Mormonism’s Negro Doctrine,” 35–39.

23. Bush, “Mormonism’s Negro Doctrine,” 35.

24. Bush, “Mormonism’s Negro Doctrine,” 35; Hugh Nibley, *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

some Latter-day Saints (and some critics of Joseph Smith) have assumed, the Book of Abraham does not support the traditional (mis)reading of Genesis 9 as condemning Blacks to perpetual slavery. Nor does it justify their being denied the priesthood. The most glaringly obvious problem is that *nowhere* in the text are the descendants of Ham said to have dark skin. Neither, for that matter, are the descendants of Ham said to be descendants of Cain; nor are they prophesied to be inheritors of this curse after Abraham's day.²⁵

In short, "the Book of Abraham [simply] does not discuss race and curses no one with slavery."²⁶ Although some Latter-day Saints attempted to use the Book of Abraham as a proof text for their misconstrued understanding of the "curse of Ham" in Genesis 9 and as a rationale for Brigham Young's priesthood and temple ban, "nowhere does the text of the Book of Abraham support that interpretation."²⁷ It is true that the Book of Abraham speaks of a "race which preserved the curse in the land" descending from Ham and that this curse "pertain[ed] to the Priesthood" (Abr. 1:24, 26). But "race" in this passage need not necessarily be read as describing those with specific skin color, and indeed, the text never makes this correlation.

Furthermore, as both Hugh Nibley and W. Paul Reeve have observed, the main issue at hand is not the skin color of Ham or his descendants, which is left unmentioned in the Book of Abraham, but rather a question of priesthood lineage and patriarchal versus matriarchal succession (Abr 1:25, 31). "Pharaoh's claim to the priesthood," wrote Nibley, "was invalid because he insisted with great force that it was the patriarchal priesthood of Noah, received through the line of Ham (Abraham 1:25–27).

Young University, 2000), 557–607; Alma Allred, "The Traditions of Their Fathers: Myth versus Reality in LDS Scriptural Writings," in *Black and Mormon*, ed. Newell G. Bringhurst and Darron T. Smith (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2004), 34–49; Richard D. Draper, S. Kent Brown, and Michael D. Rhodes, *The Pearl of Great Price: A Verse-by-Verse Commentary* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2005), 256–57; John Gee, *An Introduction to the Book of Abraham* (Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2017), 164; Reeve, *Religion of a Different Color*, 206–7; Givens, *Pearl of Greatest Price*, 134–37; John S. Thompson, "‘Being of That Lineage’: Generational Curses and Inheritance in the Book of Abraham," *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 54 (2022): 97–146.

25. On the contrary, Abraham 2:9 depicts God instructing Abraham that his future seed would "bear this ministry and Priesthood *unto all nations*" (emphasis added). See further Thompson, "‘Being of That Lineage,’” 97–146, on the nature and function of hereditary "curses" in the ancient world.

26. Gee, *Introduction to the Book of Abraham*, 164.

27. Gee, *Introduction to the Book of Abraham*, 164.

[Pharaoh's] earthly rule was blessed (Abraham 1:26), but he could not, of course, claim patriarchal *lineage* through his mother.”²⁸ Abraham himself noted that, thanks to records at his disposal (v. 31), he could trace that the priesthood had been passed from Noah through his ancestor Shem (compare Gen. 9:21–32; 11:10–32), and therefore he retained a right to priesthood.²⁹ In short, in the Book of Abraham “there is no exclusive equation between Ham and Pharaoh, or between Ham and the Egyptians, or between the Egyptians and the blacks, or between any of the above and any particular curse. What was denied was recognition of patriarchal right to the priesthood made by a claim of matriarchal succession.”³⁰

As for past attempts to use the Book of Abraham's teachings about the premortal existence to justify the priesthood and temple ban,³¹ suffice it to say the text provides no such rationale. While it is true that the text speaks of the gradation of premortal “intelligences,” some of which were “noble and great” and made “rulers” (Abr. 3:18–19, 21–23), it says positively nothing about any of these intelligences being “neutral” in the conflict with the one who “kept not his first estate” and drew many others to follow after him (v. 28), much less that being neutral resulted in them having been “cursed” with black skin in mortality and thus being denied the priesthood or temple blessings in mortality.³² Attempts to

28. Nibley, *Abraham in Egypt*, 528, emphasis in original.

29. Reeve, *Religion of a Different Color*, 206; Givens, *Pearl of Greatest Price*, 136.

30. Nibley, *Abraham in Egypt*, 587.

31. See, for example, Hyde, *Speech of Elder Orson Hyde*, 30; Pratt, “Pre-existence of Man (Continued),” 56; Roberts, “To the Youth of Israel,” 296–97; Joseph Fielding Smith, *Answers to Gospel Questions*, 5 vols. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1966), 5:163–64.

32. In a report to the Council of Fifty in March 1845, Orson Hyde related his belief that “when Cain murdered his brother Able on the earth[,] the Almighty cursed him and put a mark on him, or rather turned him black to give the black spirits a chance to come and take bodies like themselves, and the black spirits taking the black bodies made the negroes.” “Council of Fifty, Minutes, March 1844–January 1846; Volume 2, 1 March–6 May 1845,” [209], Joseph Smith Papers, accessed January 11, 2023, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/council-of-fifty-minutes-march-1844-january-1846-volume-2-1-march-6-may-1845/212>. Hyde made a similar comment two months later in April 1845. Hyde, *Speech of Elder Orson Hyde*, 30. At the same time, however, Brigham Young rejected this idea, affirming in April 1845 that “the Spirits of the Chil[dren] of Men are pure & holy without transgress[i]o[n] or any curse upon them—& the diff[erences] that you see around you is on acc[oun]t. of the circumstances that surround them . . . some have taught that bec[ause] persons are poor that it is on acc[oun]t. of transgress[i]o[n] it is false doctrine—from beginning to end.” “Council of Fifty, Minutes, March 1844–January 1846; Volume 2,” [208] n. 305. Young made a similar denial in December 1869. As recorded in Wilford Woodruff's journal, on Christmas Day of that year the question was

justify the priesthood and temple ban with the Book of Abraham's teachings on premortality are, accordingly, fallacious and unfounded.

In any case, leaders of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints today have officially disavowed racialized readings of these passages from Genesis and the Book of Abraham: "Today, the Church disavows the theories advanced in the past that black skin is a sign of divine disfavor or curse, or that it reflects unrighteous actions in a premortal life; that mixed-race marriages are a sin; or that blacks or people of any other race or ethnicity are inferior in any way to anyone else. Church leaders today unequivocally condemn all racism, past and present, in any form."³³ President Russell M. Nelson reaffirmed this in the October 2020 general conference. "I assure you that your standing before God is not determined by the color of your skin," he taught. "Favor or disfavor with God is dependent upon your devotion to God and His commandments and not the color of your skin."³⁴

As W. Paul Reeve has bluntly (and correctly) put it, "there is no need to defend past statements on race when this generation of leaders has disavowed them."³⁵ There is likewise no need to defend faulty interpretation of scripture that does a disservice to the text and hinders our understanding. The Book of Abraham's teachings about race, lineage, and priesthood are more complex than was previously recognized by readers primed by specific cultural conditions to read the text in a certain way. Nothing should stop us from probing this text with the best available current exegetical tools and methodologies.

posed in the School of the Prophets whether "the Spirits of Negroes were Nutral [neutral] in Heaven," a teaching some were attributing to Joseph Smith. "President Young said No they were not there was No Nutral spirits in Heaven at the time of the Rebellion all took sides. He said if any one said that He Herd the Prophet Joseph Saiy that the spirits of the Blacks were Nutral in Heaven He would not Believe them for He herd Joseph say to the contrary all spirits are pure that come from the presence of God" (compare Doctrine and Covenants 93:38). Brigham would then go on to give his view that Blacks were the offspring of Cain and therefore cursed, but that all the children of Adam would have an opportunity for receiving redemption and salvation except for the Sons of Perdition. "Journal (October 22, 1865–December 31, 1872," December 25, 1869, 221–22, Wilford Woodruff Papers, <https://wilfordwoodruffpapers.org/documents/39f9b320-5b5a-4100-9d62-ca5507976bfi/page/71bea87d-ed9a-4c67-9f18-ca99596677f3>.

33. "Race and the Priesthood," Gospel Topics Essays, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, accessed January 11, 2023, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/manual/gospel-topics-essays/race-and-the-priesthood?lang=eng>.

34. Russell M. Nelson, "Let God Prevail," *Liahona* 50, no. 11 (November 2020): 94.

35. W. Paul Reeve and Thomas A. Wayment, "Discussing Difficult Topics: Race and the Priesthood," *Religious Educator* 17, no. 3 (2016): 143.

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Part 2

The Book of Abraham in the Ancient World

Ur of the Chaldees

The opening verse of the Book of Abraham places the beginning of the patriarch's story "in the land of the Chaldeans" (Abr. 1:1). Several references to the city of Ur and "Ur of the Chaldees" are also present in the text (Abr. 1:20; 2:1, 4, 15; 3:1). This location is said to be the "residence of [Abraham's] fathers" and Abraham's own residence and "country" (Abr. 1:1; 2:3).

The Book of Abraham gives some specific details about Ur and this "land of the Chaldeans" that are not found in the Genesis account (Gen. 11:26–32; 12:1–5). This includes an apparent degree of Egyptian cultural and religious influence in the area (Abr. 1:6, 8–9, 11, 13) and being in or near the vicinity of "the plain of Olishem" (Abr. 1:10).

Where exactly is Abraham's "Ur of the Chaldees"? For centuries, the traditional location for Muslims, Jews, and Christians was the city of Urfa (modern Sanliurfa in southern Turkey). In the 1920s, however, the excavations of Sir Leonard Woolley at Tell el-Muqayyar in southern Iraq identified an ancient Sumerian city called Urim or Uru.¹ Woolley argued that this site was the location of Abraham's Ur, not the traditional site in Turkey. Woolley's argument has since gained widespread acceptance among biblical scholars.

While Woolley's identification of Urim with the biblical Ur has remained popular, other scholars have challenged it. Chief among them

1. Leonard Woolley and Max Mallowan, *Ur Excavations* (London: The British Museum, 1927–62); Leonard Woolley, *Ur of the Chaldees* (London: E. Benn., 1929); Leonard Woolley, *Abraham: Recent Discoveries and Hebrew Origins* (London: Faber and Faber, 1936); Leonard Woolley, *Excavations at Ur: A Record of Twelve Years' Work* (London: E. Benn. 1954); Leonard Woolley and P. R. S. Moorey, *Ur "of the Chaldees,"* rev. ed. (London: Herbert Press, 1982).

has been Cyrus Gordon, a member of Woolley's excavation team² who disputed Woolley's identification on linguistic and archaeological grounds.³ He and a vocal minority of scholars have argued for candidates in northern Syria and Turkey as being Abraham's Ur and have urged scholars to look there for correlations with the topography of the Abraham stories in Genesis.⁴

An additional complication besides locating Abraham's Ur is identifying the ancient "Chaldeans" or "Chaldees" mentioned in both the Book of Abraham and the book of Genesis. Our best current evidence suggests they were a nomadic Semitic tribe from modern Syria that emigrated into Mesopotamia and established a dynasty that eventually came to power as the Babylonian Empire.⁵ The infamous biblical king Nebuchadnezzar was a descendant of these Chaldeans, and by his time the name *Chaldean* had become synonymous with *Babylonian*.⁶

2. Cyrus H. Gordon, *A Scholar's Odyssey* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2000), 35–36. Gordon was skeptical of Woolley's efforts to "prove" the Bible was true for "well-heeled and God-fearing widows," feeling that his efforts to link Abraham's Ur with Tell el-Muqayyar compromised his otherwise "masterful" archaeological abilities.

3. Cyrus H. Gordon, "Abraham and the Merchants of Ura," *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 17 (January 1958): 28–31; Cyrus H. Gordon, "Abraham of Ur," in *Hebrew and Semitic Studies*, ed. D. Winton Thomas and W. D. McHardy (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1963), 77–84; Cyrus H. Gordon, "Where Is Abraham's Ur?," *Biblical Archaeology Review* 3, no. 2 (1977): 20–21, 52; Cyrus H. Gordon, "Recovering Canaan and Ancient Israel," in *Civilizations of the Ancient Near East*, ed. Jack M. Sasson, 4 vols. (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1995), 4:2784.

4. See, for instance, the arguments made by Douglas Frayne, "In Abraham's Footsteps," in *The World of the Aramaeans I: Studies in History and Archaeology in Honor of Paul-Eugène Dion*, ed. P. M. Michèle Daviau, John W. Wevers, and Michael Weigl (Sheffield, U.K.: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001), 216–36, who argues for "a close connection of the homeland of Abraham and his relatives" (216) in northwestern Syria.

5. A. Leo Oppenheim, *Ancient Mesopotamia: Portrait of a Dead Civilization* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977), 160–63; Trevor Bryce, *Routledge Handbook of the Peoples and Places of Ancient Western Asia* (London: Routledge, 2009), 158; compare Simo Parpola, *Letters from Assyrian Scholars to the Kings Esarhaddon and Assurbanipal*, vol. 1, *Texts* (Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 2007), 225–27.

6. Richard S. Hess, "Chaldea," in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. David Noel Freedman, 6 vols. (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 1:886; and Bryce, *Routledge Handbook of the Peoples and Places of Ancient Western Asia*, 159. But see also the cautionary note in Paul-Alain Beaulieu, "Arameans, Chaldeans, and Arabs in Cuneiform Sources from the Late Babylonian Period," in *Arameans, Chaldeans, and Arabs in Babylonia and Palestine in the First Millennium B.C.*, ed. A. Berlejung and M. P. Streck (Wiesbaden, Ger.: Harrassowitz, 2013), 33, 51, who points out that "relying solely on cuneiform sources from Babylonia, which are relatively abundant, we find no evidence that Nebuchadnezzar considered himself the ruler of Chaldeans and Arameans." Instead, the Neo-Babylonian dynasty

Unfortunately, we have little inscriptional or archaeological evidence for the identity of the Chaldeans before they entered Mesopotamia long after Abraham's lifetime. We therefore still have large gaps in the archaeological record that do not permit us to say much about the Chaldeans during Abraham's day.

Latter-day Saint scholars who have approached this question have pointed out that a northern Syrian-Turkish location for Ur appears more favorable for the Book of Abraham than a southern Mesopotamian location.⁷ For one thing, as mentioned, the Book of Abraham depicts some kind of Egyptian cultural influence or presence in and around Abraham's homeland of Ur. Abraham's kinsfolk included "the god of Pharaoh" in their ritual worship (along with a priest to lead them in that worship who served both a god named Elkenah and the Pharaoh) and practiced ritual human sacrifice "after the manner of the Egyptians" (Abr. 1:6–13). There is presently no evidence for Egyptian influence in southern Mesopotamia during the lifetime of Abraham (ca. 2000–1800 BC), but there is evidence for Egyptian influence in northern Syria at this time.⁸ This does not necessarily preclude a southern location for Abraham's Ur, since absence of

appears to have "adopted an archaizing political vocabulary which harked back to the time of the First Dynasty of Babylon and even to the Old Akkadian period. The perennial and unchanging nature of Babylonian civilization and its Sumero-Akkadian heritage was emphasized, and the reality of a society fragmented along ethnic, tribal, and linguistic lines, as well as by several other factors of social and institutional nature seems to be denied."

7. John A. Tvedtnes and Ross Christensen, "Ur of the Chaldeans: Increasing Evidence on the Birthplace of Abraham and the Original Homeland of the Hebrews," in *Special Publications of the Society for Early Historic Archaeology* (Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University Press, 1985); John M. Lundquist, "Was Abraham at Ebla? A Cultural Background of the Book of Abraham," in *Studies in Scripture, Volume Two: The Pearl of Great Price*, ed. Robert L. Millet and Kent P. Jackson (Salt Lake City: Randall Book, 1985), 230–35; Paul Y. Hoskisson, "Where Was Ur of the Chaldees?," in *The Pearl of Great Price: Revelations from God*, ed. H. Donl Peterson and Charles D. Tate Jr. (Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 1989), 127–31; Hugh Nibley, *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), 234–36, 238, 247; John Gee and Stephen D. Ricks, "Historical Plausibility: The Historicity of the Book of Abraham as a Case Study," in *Historicity and the Latter-day Saint Scriptures*, ed. Paul Y. Hoskisson (Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 2001), 70–72; 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), 418–28; John Gee, "Abraham and Idrimi," *Journal of the Book of Mormon and Other Restoration Scripture* 22, no. 1 (2013): 34–39.

8. See "Potiphar's Hill," 92–97 herein; and "Sobek, the God of Pharaoh," 83–87 herein.

evidence is not evidence of absence, but a northern Ur would appear, based on current evidence, to converge better with what is depicted in the Book of Abraham.

Additionally, the proximity of Abraham's Ur to "the plain of Olishem" is an important geographical detail that works best in a northern location as opposed to a southern one. The Book of Abraham's Olishem has been plausibly identified with the ancient city of Ulisum or Ulishum located somewhere in southern Turkey (although the precise location remains debated).⁹

Taken together, the evidence from the Book of Abraham text and external archaeological and inscriptional sources can reasonably point us in the direction of modern northern Syria and southern Turkey as the ancient homeland of Abraham. While there are many questions that scholars still grapple with, enough evidence has surfaced over the years to paint an overall plausible picture of the historical and geographical world described in the Book of Abraham.

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Smoot, Stephen O. "'In the Land of the Chaldeans': The Search for Abraham's Homeland Revisited." *BYU Studies Quarterly* 56, no. 3 (2017): 7–37.

9. See "The Plain of Olishem," 88–91 herein.

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. Gilium, 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.

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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.

Human Sacrifice

The Book of Abraham begins with an account of the biblical patriarch Abraham almost being sacrificed to the “dumb idols” and “strange gods” of his kinsfolk (Abr. 1:7–8). The form of sacrifice practiced by Abraham’s kinsfolk in Ur of the Chaldees (vv. 8, 13) was said to be “after the manner of the Egyptians” (vv. 9, 11), and indeed a “priest of Pharaoh” was involved in this procedure (vv. 7–8, 10). This suggests that Abraham’s kinsfolk had adopted Egyptian practices and incorporated these elements into their local (Chaldean) rituals.

This raises the question of whether the ancient Egyptians ever practiced what is commonly called “human sacrifice.”¹ Scholars disagree on what precise terminology to use when describing this phenomenon. Egyptologists typically use phrases such as “sacred violence,” “ritual slaying,” “sanctioned killing,” “capital punishment,” “ritual homicide,” and the like to avoid the pejorative connotations that arise with the term “human sacrifice.”² Whatever it is called, however, the practice

1. Past studies have looked at the practice of “human sacrifice” among Mesopotamian and Levantine peoples and the implications for the Book of Abraham. See William James Adams Jr., “Human Sacrifice and the Book of Abraham,” *BYU Studies* 9, no. 4 (1969): 473–80; and Kevin Barney, “On Elkenah as Canaanite El,” *Journal of the Book of Mormon and Other Restoration Scripture* 19, no. 1 (2010): 29–30. See also the discussion in Beate Pongratz-Leisten, “Ritual Killing and Sacrifice in the Ancient Near East,” in *Human Sacrifice in Jewish and Christian Tradition*, ed. Karin Finsterbusch, Armin Lange, and K. F. Diethard Römheld (Leiden, Neth.: Brill, 2007), 3–33.

2. See the discussion in Kerry Muhlestein, *Violence in the Service of Order: The Religious Framework for Sanctioned Killing in Ancient Egypt* (Oxford: Archaeopress, 2011), 5–8; Herman te Velde, “Human Sacrifice in Ancient Egypt,” in *The Strange World of Human Sacrifice*, ed. Jan N. Bremmer (Leuven, Belg.: Peeters, 2007), 127–34; Donald B. Redford, “Violence in Ancient Egyptian Society,” in *The Cambridge World History of Violence*, vol. 1, *The Prehistoric and Ancient Worlds*, ed. Garrett G. Fagan and others

documented among the ancient Egyptians ultimately involved putting humans to death for transgressing religious or political boundaries and norms, sometimes done in a ritualistic or ceremonial manner. There is, in the words of one Egyptologist, “indisputable evidence for the practice of human sacrifice in classical ancient Egypt.”³

Some of the evidence for this practice dates to the likely time of Abraham (ca. 2000–1800 BC), and “the story presented in the Book of Abraham matches remarkably well with the picture of ritual slaying” in Egypt during the same period.⁴ For example, a stone inscription from the eighteenth century BC records “the establishment of penalties for intruders [of sacred space]: anyone found within the limits, except a priest on duty, is to be burnt.”⁵ This indicates a cultural setting “in which slaying someone for desecration of sacred space was an accepted practice.”⁶ A royal inscription from two centuries earlier depicts the Egyptian king decreeing death upon “children of the enemy” for desecrating a temple. This apparently included punishment by flaying, impalement, beheading, and burning. “When the sacred house of a god had been desecrated, the Egyptian king responded by sacrificing those responsible.”⁷

There is also direct archaeological evidence for “human sacrifice” or ritual slaying at an Egyptian fortress at the site of Mirgissa in northern

(Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 342–59, esp. 350–52; and Jacobus van Dijk, “Ritual Homicide in Ancient Egypt,” in *The Value of a Human Life: Ritual Killing and Human Sacrifice in Antiquity*, ed. Karel C. Innemée (Leiden, Neth.: Rijksmuseum van Oudheden, 2022), 41–52. It should be remembered that the Book of Abraham itself never calls the practice described in its opening chapter “human sacrifice,” instead referring to it as the “sacrifice of the heathen” (Abr. 1:7), an “offering,” or a “thank-offering” (vv. 8–10). Quibbling over what Egyptologists today prefer to call the practice is largely a red herring. What matters is whether what is described in the text of the Book of Abraham converges with the external evidence.

3. Robert Kriech Ritner, *The Mechanics of Ancient Egyptian Magical Practice* (Chicago: Oriental Institute, 1993), 162–63.

4. Kerry Muhlestein and John Gee, “An Egyptian Context for the Sacrifice of Abraham,” *Journal of the Book of Mormon and Other Restoration Scripture* 20, no. 2 (2011): 72.

5. Stela Cairo JE 35256, lines 5–6, in Anthony Leahy, “A Protective Measure at Abydos in the Thirteenth Dynasty,” *Journal of Egyptian Archaeology* 75 (1989): 42–43, quote at 49.

6. Muhlestein and Gee, “Egyptian Context for the Sacrifice of Abraham,” 73; compare Harco Willems, “Crime, Cult and Capital Punishment (Mo’alla Inscription 8),” *Journal of Egyptian Archaeology* 76 (1990): 27–54.

7. Muhlestein and Gee, “Egyptian Context for the Sacrifice of Abraham,” 73, citing Donald B. Redford, “The Tod Inscription of Senwosret I and Early 12th Dynasty Involvement in Nubia and the South,” *Journal of the Society for the Study of Egyptian Antiquities* 17, nos. 1–2 (1987): 42–44.

Sudan. During the time of Abraham, this site was part of the Egyptian empire and was under Egyptian control. Discovered at the site was “a deposit . . . containing various ritual objects such as melted wax figurines, a flint knife, and the decapitated body of a foreigner slain during rites designed to ward off enemies. Almost universally, this discovery has been accepted as a case of human sacrifice.”⁸

This view is supported by execration texts, or magical spells used to ward off evil and curse enemies by ritually destroying a wax or clay human effigy (comparable to a voodoo doll).⁹ It would appear from the evidence uncovered at Mirgissa that on some occasions these rituals were performed on actual human victims, including foreigners who were seen as a threat to Egyptian political and social order.¹⁰

From this evidence, we can conclude that Egyptian “human sacrifice” during Abraham’s lifetime was more or less “ritual” in nature, that it was sometimes undertaken “for cultic offenses” or offenses against Egypt’s gods, that “the pharaoh [was sometimes] involved and the sacrifice [was sometimes] under his orders,” that sometimes these sacrifices were initiated “for rebellion against the pharaoh,” and that “the sacrifice could take place both in Egypt proper and outside the boundaries in areas under Egyptian influence.”¹¹ While caution is still necessary because of gaps in the available data, enough evidence is available to indicate that “institutionally sanctioned ritual violence [in ancient Egypt] centered [on] two main ideas: interference with cult, and rebellion.”¹² This converges remarkably well with the Book of Abraham, offering a plausible historical context for Abraham’s near-sacrifice.

8. Muhlestein and Gee, “Egyptian Context for the Sacrifice of Abraham,” 73; compare Ritner, *Mechanics of Ancient Egyptian Magical Practice*, 162–63; and Stephen O. Smoot, “Framing the Book of Abraham: Presumptions and Paradigms,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 47 (2021): 294–99.

9. See Kerry Muhlestein, “Execration Ritual,” in *UCLA Encyclopedia of Egyptology*, April 2008, <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/3f6268zf>.

10. Muhlestein and Gee, “Egyptian Context for the Sacrifice of Abraham,” 74; Velde, “Human Sacrifice in Ancient Egypt,” 131–32; Smoot, “Framing the Book of Abraham,” 294–99.

11. Muhlestein and Gee, “Egyptian Context for the Sacrifice of Abraham,” 74.

12. Kerry Muhlestein, “Sacred Violence: When Ancient Egyptian Punishment Was Dressed in Ritual Trappings,” *Near Eastern Archaeology* 78, no. 4 (2015): 229.

Further Reading

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The Idolatrous God Elkenah

The Book of Abraham tells how Abraham's kinsfolk worshipped false gods. One of these was "the god of Elkenah" (Abr. 1:6). When Abraham preached against the worship of this god, he said that his kinsfolk "hearkened not unto [his] voice, but endeavored to take away [his] life by the hand of the priest of Elkenah" (v. 7). Not only did the priest try to take Abraham's life, but "this priest had offered upon this altar three virgins at one time, . . . because of their virtue; they would not bow down to worship gods of wood or of stone, therefore they were killed upon this altar" (v. 11). Fortunately, the angel of the Lord delivered Abraham out of the priest's hands before he could be sacrificed (vv. 15–20; Facsimile 1).

What do we know about the ancient god Elkenah? No deity of that name is mentioned in the King James Bible,¹ but in the last century archaeologists have unearthed evidence of his worship. Elkenah is very likely the shortened form of the name of the Canaanite god *'el-qoneh-ha-areš*, meaning "God who created the earth" (or "God, creator of the earth").²

1. The name *Elkanah* appears in the KJV Bible as a masculine personal name for humans. It is, for example, the name of the prophet Samuel's father (1 Sam. 1:1, 4, 8, 19, 21, 23). A form of the name appears in the Hebrew Bible as a divine epithet (for example, Gen. 14:19, 22), but in the KJV it is translated ("God, possessor of heaven and earth") as opposed to transliterated as a proper name/epithet (*'ēl 'elyōn qōnēh šāmayim wā-āreš*). The personal name Elkanah in the Bible is derived from this divine name/epithet. Compare N. Avigad, "Excavations in the Jewish Quarter of the Old City of Jerusalem, 1971 (Third Preliminary Report)," *Israel Exploration Journal* 22, no. 4 (1972): 195–96.

2. W. Röllig, "El-Creator-Of-The-Earth," in *Dictionary of Deities and Demons in the Bible*, ed. Karel van der Toorn, Bob Becking, and Pieter W. van der Horst (Leiden, Neth.: Brill, 1999), 280–81; Kevin Barney, "On Elkenah as Canaanite El," *Journal of the Book of Mormon and Other Restoration Scripture* 19, no. 1 (2010): 22–35.

Among the ancient Hittites living in Asia Minor he was known as Elkunirsha.³

Originally a Canaanite deity, his worship spread to the Hittite capital of Hattusha in northern Turkey, to Karatepe near the border of modern Turkey and Syria, to Palmyra in inland Syria, to Jerusalem, and to Lep-tis Magna in Libya. All told, Elkunirsha was worshipped for more than 1,500 years—from the time of Abraham to the time of Christ.⁴

We know something about Elkunirsha (Elkenah) from a Canaanite myth that was preserved by the Hittites.⁵ Unfortunately, the clay tablets containing this myth are broken, so we do not have all the story. One scholar summarized the story as follows: “Ašertu, the wife of Elkunirša, attempts to seduce Ba’al [the storm god]. The Storm-god reveals everything to her husband and insults her on his inspiration. Thirsting for revenge, Ašertu regains the favor of her husband who then lets her do whatever she likes with Ba’al. The goddess Anat now comes on the scene. Having overheard the conversation between Elkunirša and Ašertu, she warns Ba’al.”⁶

3. Douglas R. Frayne and Johanna H. Stuckey, *A Handbook of Gods and Goddesses of the Ancient Near East* (University Park, Pa.: Pennsylvania State University Press, Eisenbrauns, 2021), 86; Ben H. L. van Gessel, *Onomasticon of the Hittite Pantheon* (Leiden, Neth.: E. J. Brill, 1998), 1:63; Mark S. Smith, *God in Translation: Deities in Cross-Cultural Discourse in the Biblical World* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2010), 82–83; Maciej Popko, *Religions of Asia Minor* (Warsaw: Academic Publications Dialog, 1995), 128; and N. Wyatt, “Asherah,” in der Toorn, Becking, and van der Horst, *Dictionary of Deities and Demons in the Bible*, 101.

4. Patrick D. Miller Jr. “El, the Creator of Earth,” *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research* 239 (1980): 43–46; F. O. Hvidberg-Hansen, “Uni-Ashtarte and Tanit-Iuno Caelestis: Two Phoenician Goddesses of Fertility Reconsidered from Recent Archaeological Discoveries,” in *Archaeology and Fertility Cult in the Ancient Mediterranean: First International Conference on Archaeology of the Ancient Mediterranean. University of Malta, 2–5 September 1985*, ed. Anthony Bonanno (Amsterdam: B. R. Grüner Publishing, 1985), 170–71.

5. “Although the particular events of this tale are not known from the mythological tablets recovered at Ugarit, the story certainly belongs to the corpus of northern Syrian myths which they represent.” Gary Beckman, “Elkunriša and Ašertu (1.55),” in *The Context of Scripture, Volume 1: Canonical Compositions from the Biblical World*, ed. William W. Hallo (Leiden, Neth.: Brill, 2003), 149; compare Heinrich Otten, “Ein kanaänischer Mythos aus Boğazköy,” *Mitteilungen des Instituts für Orientforschung* 1 (1953): 125–50.

6. Popko, *Religions of Asia Minor*, 128. See also Beckman, “Elkunriša and Ašertu (1.55),” 149.

Then the text unfortunately breaks off. What the evidence appears to indicate, however, is that, along with the other deities in the text,⁷ the god Elkenah mentioned in the Book of Abraham has very likely been identified in the ancient world.

Further Reading

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Pike, Dana M. "Idolatrous Gods Referenced in Abraham 1." In *Pearl of Great Price Reference Companion*, edited by Dennis L. Largey, 164. Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2017.

7. John Gee, "Four Idolatrous Gods in the Book of Abraham," *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 38 (2020): 133–52. This is especially remarkable considering that contemporaries of Joseph Smith criticized the names of the idolatrous gods given in Abraham 1 and Facsimile 1 as being "fanciful." "Mormonism; or, New Mohammedanism in England and America," *Dublin University Magazine* 21, no. 123 (March 1843): 297.

Sobek, the God of Pharaoh

The opening chapter of the Book of Abraham identifies “the god of Pharaoh” as being one of the idolatrous gods worshipped by Abraham’s kinsfolk (Abr. 1:6, 9, 13, 17). In figure 9 of Facsimile 1 of the Book of Abraham, this god is depicted as a crocodile. Is there any evidence for who this god might have been and whether he was worshipped in Abraham’s lifetime (ca. 2000–1800 BC)?

A strong case can be made for identifying the “god of Pharaoh” in the Book of Abraham as the Egyptian deity Sobek.¹ This god was worshipped even before Abraham’s day and was commonly depicted as either a crocodile-headed man or a crocodile wearing a crown.² Anciently, “he was regarded as a powerful deity with several important associations,” among them “procreative and vegetative fertility” and, importantly for the Book of Abraham, “the Egyptian king . . . as a symbol of pharaonic potency and might.”³

The worship of Sobek was popular in Egypt in Abraham’s day. Many names from this period contain the name Sobek as a theophoric

1. See the case made in Quinten Barney, “Sobek: The Idolatrous God of Pharaoh Amenemhet III,” *Journal of the Book of Mormon and Other Restoration Scripture* 22, no. 2 (2013): 22–27.

2. Geraldine Pinch, *Egyptian Mythology: A Guide to the Gods, Goddesses, and Traditions of Ancient Egypt* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 200; Marco Zecchi, *Sobek of Shedet: The Crocodile God in the Fayyum in the Dynastic Period*, Studi Sull’antico Egitto 2 (Todi, It.: Tau Editrice, 2010); and Tine Bagh, “Sobek Crowned,” in *Lotus and Laurel: Studies on Egyptian Language and Religion in Honour of Paul John Frandsen*, ed. Rune Nyord and Kim Ryholt (Copenhagen: University of Copenhagen, Museum Tusulanum Press, 2015), 1–17.

3. Richard H. Wilkinson, *The Complete Gods and Goddesses of Ancient Egypt* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 2003), 218–19.

element,⁴ including the names of the last ruler of the Twelfth Dynasty (ca. 1991–1782 BC) and of no less than seven different rulers of the Thirteenth Dynasty (ca. 1800–1650 BC), who may likely have been coterminous with Abraham and the other patriarchs from Genesis.⁵ “[Sobek’s] sanctuaries were numerous and widespread” throughout Egypt during this time.⁶ Iconography of the god Sobek even made its way into northern Syria. At the site of Ebla, an important Syrian city throughout the third and second millennia BC, artifacts bearing the images of different Egyptian gods, including Sobek, have been identified by archaeologists.⁷

The ancient Egyptian king Amenemhet III, who may have been a contemporary of Abraham, venerated Sobek, bringing the god “to specific prominence” during his reign.⁸ “With Amenemhat III, Sobek of Shedet became the best example of the success of the crocodile-gods in the Twelfth Dynasty. In a wide range of objects, this king adopted, as

4. Hermann Ranke, *Die Ägyptischen Personennamen* (Glückstadt, Ger.: Verlag von J. J. Augustin, 1935), 1:303–6.

5. Ronald J. Leprohon, *The Great Name: Ancient Egyptian Royal Titulary* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2013), 60–61, 64, 67–68, 70.

6. Wilkinson, *Complete Gods and Goddesses of Ancient Egypt*, 220.

7. Beatrice Teissier, *Egyptian Iconography on Syro-Palestinian Cylinder Seals of the Middle Bronze Age* (Fribourg, Switz.: University Press Fribourg Switzerland, 1996), 10 n. 34; 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), 421–22; Joan Aruz, Kim Benzel, and Jean M. Evans, eds., *Beyond Babylon: Art, Trade, and Diplomacy in the Second Millennium B.C.* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2008), 37; Kerry Muhlestein, “Levantine Thinking in Egypt,” in *Egypt, Canaan, and Israel: History, Imperialism, Ideology and Literature*, ed. S. Bar, D. Kahn, and J. J. Shirley (Leiden, Neth.: Brill, 2011), 194; Paolo Matthiae, “Elba: Recent Excavation Results and the Continuity of Syrian Art,” in *Cultures in Contact: From Mesopotamia to the Mediterranean in the Second Millennium B.C.*, ed. Joan Aruz, Sarah B. Graff, and Yelena Rakic (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2013), 109–10. Note also the important comment in Anna-Latifa Mourad, *Rise of the Hyksos: Egypt and the Levant from the Middle Kingdom to the Early Second Intermediate Period* (Oxford: Archaeopress, 2015), 173: “Two additional antithetic [ivory] fragments [discovered at Ebla] represent a falcon-headed figure, whereas another inlay preserves the full body of a crocodile-headed individual. . . . Such Egyptian elements are manifestations of royalty and divinity. The Levantine artist(s) who crafted the inlays was thereby well-versed in Egyptian symbolism and art. The choice to pair the inlays with a piece of palatial furniture further highlights the association of Egyptian art with Eblaite elitism and power.”

8. Tine Bagh, “Sobek Crowned,” 1; compare Zecchi, *Sobek of Shedet*, 21–106, esp. 37–53.



FIGURE 20. Relief at the temple of Kom Ombo depicting the god Sobek (*middle*). Photograph by Stephen O. Smoot.

had never happened before, the epithet ‘beloved of’ Sobek of Shedet.”⁹ In a hymn praising Sobek, Amenemhet III is mentioned toward the end of the text: “It is for Sobek the Shedytite, Horus dwelling in Shedyt, lord of myrrh, delighting in the giving of incense. May thou be merciful to King Amenemhet, through whom thy face is happy on this day.”¹⁰ The mention of Sobek in connection with Horus is also significant, since Horus was another Egyptian deity closely associated with kingship who was syncretized with Sobek in texts from Abraham’s day.¹¹

9. Zecchi, *Sobek of Shedet*, 41.

10. Barney, “Sobek,” 26, modifying the translation provided in Alan Gardiner, “Hymns to Sobk in a Ramesseum Papyrus,” *Revue d’Égyptologie* 11, no. 2 (1957): 43–56, quote at 48.

11. Zecchi, *Sobek of Shedet*, 47, reviewing Middle Kingdom evidence, observes how “in the Middle Kingdom, in the Fayyum, Sobek’s duties were manifold; he exercised

From this evidence unknown in Joseph Smith's day,¹² we can say the following about "the god of Pharaoh" in the Book of Abraham and Facsimile 1. First, the god in question is arguably the crocodile deity Sobek. Second, among other things, Sobek was closely associated with the Pharaoh of Egypt.¹³ Third, Sobek was especially venerated by King Amenemhet III, a possible contemporary of Abraham. Fourth, and finally, specimens of Sobek iconography have been recovered from the likely region of Abraham's homeland during the right period for Abraham's lifetime (the Middle Bronze Age).

control over the whole world, from the waters to the sky, but he was essentially a god who had become Horus and, as such, connected with royal doctrines. The image of the crocodile is . . . the shape that Horus himself adopts when entering the Fayyum. Moreover, the temple of Sobek became a centre for the recognition of the royal power. The syncretism between the two deities and the new group of epithets had a specific function. They not only increased the importance of the local—and provincial—crocodile-god, but they also served the king, who could receive the divine essence of kingship only from a god who was able to be strongly royal."

12. One source contemporary to Joseph Smith did report that "the crocodile or hippopotamus" was "the emblem of Pharaoh and the Egyptians" and "was one of their principal divinities." This source also reported that "Pharaoh . . . signifies a crocodile." Adam Clarke, *The Holy Bible, Containing the Old and New Testaments*, 6 vols. (London: Thomas Tegg and Son, 1836), 1:1901, 281. (This Bible edition with Clarke's notes was based on an eight-volume commentary series Clarke published between 1810–1826.) By contrast, the Book of Abraham says nothing about hippopotami and indicates that "Pharaoh signifies king by royal blood" (Abr. 1:20), not "crocodile." Furthermore, none of the archaeological or inscriptional evidence confirming Sobek's presence in northern Syria or his association with Egyptian kingship was available in Joseph Smith's lifetime.

13. See further Elizabeth Laney, "Sobek and the Double Crown," *The Ancient World: A Scholarly Journal for the Study of Antiquity* 34 (2003): 155–68, esp. 158; Maryan Ragheb, "The Rise of Sobek in the Middle Kingdom," American Research Center in Egypt, accessed February 8, 2023, <https://www.arce.org/resource/rise-sobek-middle-kingdom>, emphasis in original: "It was Amenemhat III who brought the role of 'Sobek of Shedet-Horus residing in Shedet' to the highest significance. Sobek-Horus of Shedet became associated with epithets like 'Lord of the *wrrt* (White) Crown,' 'he who resides in the great palace' and 'lord of the great palace.' All of these epithets were related to the king rather than associated with any god. Even the name of Horus in this merged form was enclosed in a *serekh* like a king's name. The king has always been identified as Horus on earth. With the new divine form of Sobek-Horus, the king as Horus merged with Sobek and incorporated himself as one with the god Sobek. Sobek's association with divine kingship is illustrated in the Amenemhat III's 'Baptism of the Pharaoh' scene at his Madinet Madi Temple in Fayum. This scene, the earliest of its kind, depicts Sobek and Anubis anointing Amenemhat III with *ankh* signs of life. The anointment marks the king's initiation into eternal kingship and was usually related to the state god's divine procreation of the king."

All of this reinforces the argument that “the [B]ook of Abraham accurately describes an aspect of the ancient world about which Joseph Smith could have known little or nothing.”¹⁴

Further Reading

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14. John Gee, “The Crocodile God of Pharaoh in Mesopotamia,” *Insights* (October 1996): 2.

The Plain of Olishem

The opening chapter of the Book of Abraham mentions a location called “the plain of Olishem” (Abr. 1:10). It isn’t clear from the text whether the plain itself was Olishem, or whether Olishem was some city or region in the area to which the plain was adjacent, or whether the plain takes its name from a major city on the plain. In any case, this “plain of Olishem” was near Abraham’s homeland of Ur of the Chaldees, according to the text.

In 1985, a Latter-day Saint archaeologist named John M. Lundquist published a pioneering article situating the Book of Abraham in an ancient geographical and cultural environment in northern Mesopotamia.¹ Among the points raised by Lundquist was the possible identification of the Book of Abraham’s Olishem with the ancient place name Ulisum (or Ulishum).² Lundquist pointed to inscriptional evidence

1. John M. Lundquist, “Was Abraham at Ebla? A Cultural Background of the Book of Abraham (Abraham 1 and 2),” in *Studies in Scripture, Volume Two: The Pearl of Great Price*, ed. Robert L. Millet and Kent P. Jackson (Salt Lake City: Randall Book, 1985), 225–37.

2. Read as *u-li-si-im^{ki}* in C. J. Gadd and Leon Legrain, eds., *Ur Excavations, Texts I: Royal Inscriptions* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1928), 75; *ú-li-si-im^{ki}* in Hans Hirsch, “Die Inschriften der Könige von Agade,” *Archiv für Orientforschung* 20 (1963): 74; *U-li-si-im^{ki}* in Benjamin R. Foster, “The Siege of Armanum,” *Journal of the Ancient Near Eastern Society* 14, no. 1 (1982): 29; *Ū-li-ši-im^{ki}* or *Ū-li-šé-em^{ki}* in John Gee and Stephen D. Ricks, “Historical Plausibility: The Historicity of the Book of Abraham as a Case Study,” in *Historicity and the Latter-day Saint Scriptures*, ed. Paul Y. Hoskisson (Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 2001), 75; and *ú-li-si-im^{ki}* in Nashat Alkhafaji and Gianni Marchesi, “Naram-Sin’s War against Armanum and Ebla in a Newly-Discovered Inscription from Tulul al-Baqarat,” *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 79, no. 1 (2020): 16. On the acceptable normalization of the name as either Ulisum or Ulishum, see Alkhafaji and Marchesi, “Naram-Sin’s War against Armanum and Ebla,” 14. Compare also Wolfram von Soden, *Das akkadische Syllabar*,

from the ancient city of Ur in southern Mesopotamia dating to the time of the Akkadian king Naram-Sin (who reigned ca. 2254–2218 BC), which spoke of this Ulisum in what is today northern Syria or southern Turkey.³ The relevant portion of the inscription reads:

Whereas, for all time since the formation of humankind there has never been a king who overthrew Armanum and Ebla, by the weapon(?) of Nergal did Naram-Sin, the mighty, open the only path and he gave him Aranum and Ebla. He bestowed upon him Amanus, the Cedar Mountain and the Upper Sea, and, by the weapon of Dagan, exalter of his kingship, did Naram-Sin, the mighty, defeat Armanum and Ebla. Then, from the very mouth of the Eurphrates, he smote the river(-bank) as far as Ulisum [*u-li-si-im^{ki}*], as well as the people whom Dagan had for the first time bestowed upon him, and they bear for him the burden of Ilaba his god. The Amanus too, mount of cedars, he conquered completely.⁴

In 2020, additional inscriptional evidence from another site in modern Iraq (Tulul al-Baqarat) was published that further documented Naram-Sin's conquest of Armanum and Ebla.⁵ As with the inscription from Ur, this source also identifies a place called Ulisum: “[Indeed,] with the weapon of Dagan, the one who magnifies his kingship, Naram-Sin the mighty conquered Armanum and Ebla. Moreover, from the edge of the Euphrates as far as Ulisum, [he smote the peoples whom Dagan had newly bestowed upon him].”⁶ Scholars have debated the location of this ancient Ulisum, and multiple sites have been proposed over the

Analecta Orientalia 27 (Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1948), 43, 73; I. J. Gelb, *Old Akkadian Writing and Grammar*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961), 34–35; Arthur Ungnad, *Akkadian Grammar*, 5th rev. ed. (Atlanta: Scholar's Press, 1992), 25–26, on the *s/š* sibilants in Old Akkadian (but also note the counterarguments made against Gelb's reconstruction in Rebecca Hasselbach, *Sargonic Akkadian: A Historical and Comparative Study of the Syllabic Texts* [Wiesbaden, Ger.: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2005], 95–96); and Lundquist, “Was Abraham at Ebla?,” 234, on the pronunciation of the *u/o* vowels in the name.

3. Lundquist, “Was Abraham at Ebla?,” 233–34; compare Gadd and Legrain, *Ur Excavations, Texts I*, 74–75, plate LVI; Hirsch, “Die Inschriften der Könige von Agade,” 74; Foster, “Siege of Armanum,” 29; and Michael C. Astour, “Overland Trade Routes in Ancient Western Asia,” in *Civilizations of the Ancient Near East*, ed. Jack M. Sasson (Peabody, Mass: Hendrickson, 1995), 3:1407.

4. *UET I* 275, II, translation in Foster, “Siege of Armanum,” 31–32; compare the recent translation in Alkhafaji and Marchesi, “Naram-Sin's War against Armanum and Ebla,” 16.

5. Alkhafaji and Marchesi, “Naram-Sin's War against Armanum and Ebla,” 1–20.

6. Translation in Alkhafaji and Marchesi, “Naram-Sin's War against Armanum and Ebla,” 8–9.

years, with no clear consensus having been reached other than that it lies somewhere west of the Euphrates River in southern Turkey.⁷

Subsequent studies since Lundquist's initial proposal have strengthened his enticing identification of Olishem in the Book of Abraham as ancient Ulisum.⁸ In fact, one non-Latter-day Saint archaeologist working in the area has favorably suggested a possible (though inconclusive) connection between Olishem in the Book of Abraham and Ulisum from Naram-Sin's inscription.⁹ In 2013, excavators at the Turkish site of Oylum Höyük near the Syrian border announced that it was the ancient Ulisum mentioned in Naram-Sin's inscription and identified it as "the city of Abraham." Because more archaeological investigation needs to be undertaken at the site, the confirmatory significance of this evidence for the Book of Abraham is "promising but not [yet] proven."¹⁰ There are still gaps in the archaeological and inscriptional record that preclude a definitive identification of the Book of Abraham's Olishem with any particular archaeological site at this time.¹¹ Nevertheless, the following can be said with a fair amount of certainty:

There is definitely an ancient site with the name Ulisum or Ulishum.

There is no agreement as to the precise location of Ulisum, but it can most likely be identified in a specific general region (west of the Euphrates in southern Turkey). Many scholars are currently interested in exploring where precisely Ulisum may be in this region.

Olishem is a name from the Book of Abraham, which matches the phonetics and time period of the known site of Uli[s]h[um].

7. See the discussion Alkhafaji and Marchesi, "Naram-Sin's War against Armanum and Ebla," 14.

8. Gee and Ricks, "Historical Plausibility," 75–76.

9. Atilla Engin, "Oylum Höyük İçin Bir Lokalizasyon Önerisi: Ulisum/Ullis/İllis," in *Armizzi: Engin Özgenç Armağan*, ed. Atilla Engin, Barbara Helwing, and Bora Uysal (Ankara, Turk.: Asitan Kitap, 2014), 136.

10. John Gee, "Has Olishem Been Discovered?," *Journal of the Book of Mormon and Other Restoration Scripture* 22, no. 2 (2013): 105–6.

11. For instance, even the ancient name of the site of Oylum Höyük remains disputed. So, whereas Engin, "Oylum Höyük İçin Bir Lokalizasyon Önerisi," 129–49, argues that the site was ancient Ulisum, another scholar has argued that it was called *Ḫaššu(wa)* based on his reading of some inscriptional evidence discovered at the site. Ahmet Ünal, "A Hittite Treaty Tablet from Oylum Höyük in Southeastern Turkey and the Location of *Ḫaššu(wa)*," *Anatolian Studies* 65 (2015): 19–34. In any case, "strong support from written sources and archaeological material is lacking," so "the question [of the identity of Oylum Höyük] remains to be answered unequivocally only if and when further evidence turns up, which can only be supplied by texts." Ünal, "Hittite Treaty Tablet from Oylum Höyük," 32.

A likely region of the ancient Ulisum matches well with some geographic interpretations of the Book of Abraham.¹²

Textual and archaeological studies about Ulisum can inform our understanding of the Book of Abraham, and studying the Book of Abraham can in turn inform these textual and archaeological studies because the Book of Abraham provides geographical information about Olishem not available in any other extant ancient source.¹³ Future discoveries may shed further light on this topic, but for now it can be said that Ulisum is plausible and promising (though not yet definitive) evidence for the Book of Abraham's Olishem.¹⁴

Further Reading

Gee, John. "Has Olishem Been Discovered?" *Journal of the Book of Mormon and Other Restoration Scripture* 22, no. 2 (2013): 104–7.

Gee, John, and Stephen D. Ricks. "Historical Plausibility: The Historicity of the Book of Abraham as a Case Study." In *Historicity and the Latter-day Saint Scriptures*, ed. Paul Y. Hoskisson, 63–69. Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 2001.

12. See the discussion in Stephen O. Smoot, "In the Land of the Chaldeans: The Search for Abraham's Homeland Revisited," *BYU Studies Quarterly* 56, no. 3 (2017): 7–37, esp. 33–34.

13. Engin, "Oylum Höyük İçin Bir Lokalizasyon Önerisi," 136.

14. Gee, "Has Olishem Been Discovered?," 106.

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.

The Blood of the Canaanites

The first chapter of the Book of Abraham contains a short detail about the ancestry of Pharaoh, the king of Egypt: “Now this king of Egypt was a descendant from the loins of Ham, and was a partaker of the blood of the Canaanites by birth. From this descent sprang all the Egyptians, and thus the blood of the Canaanites was preserved in the land” (Abr. 1:21–22). Although he was a righteous man who “judged his people wisely and justly all his days” (v. 26), Pharaoh could not lay claim to any priesthood authority because of his ancestry (v. 27). This detail in the text about the king of Egypt being “a partaker of the blood of the Canaanites” may appear odd at first glance but might make some historical sense in a specific way for Abraham’s time and circumstances.

The Egyptian Twelfth Dynasty ruled a unified Egypt for about 200 years from circa 1990 to circa 1800 BC. However, at the end of the Twelfth Dynasty, control over Egypt was split between the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Dynasties.¹ The Thirteenth Dynasty rulers were native Egyptians and generally continued carrying out the policies of the Twelfth Dynasty. However, scholars have determined from their Semitic names that the Fourteenth Dynasty rulers were likely not native Egyptians, but rather were probably natives of Syria-Palestine (Canaan).² “[This] dynasty came into being when the Canaanite population in the [Nile] Delta proclaimed its own ruler . . . after having gradually seceded

1. Gae Callender, “The Middle Kingdom Renaissance (c.2055–1650 BC),” in *The Oxford History of Ancient Egypt*, ed. Ian Shaw (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 172.

2. K. S. B. Ryholt, *The Political Situation in Egypt during the Second Intermediate Period, c. 1800–1550 B.C.* (Copenhagen: University of Copenhagen, Museum Tusulanum Press, 1997), 94, 99–101.

from the rest of Egypt during the late Twelfth Dynasty.”³ It could thus be that Abraham had in mind the Asiatic or Semitic kings of the Fourteenth Dynasty with his comment that the “king of Egypt . . . was a partaker of the blood of the Canaanites.”

This, in turn, might help us narrow down a general range of dates for Abraham’s life. According to the biblical account, Abraham lived to be 175 years old (Gen. 25:7–8). If this figure is taken at face value, and if as a young man Abraham lived toward the end of the Twelfth Dynasty, perhaps during the reign of Pharaoh Amenemhat III (ca. 1860–1814 BC),⁴ this would afford enough time to accommodate either the early (ca. 1800 BC) or late (ca. 1730 BC) date for the commencement of the Fourteenth Dynasty of Canaanite pharaohs.⁵

Admittedly, the biblical age of Abraham seems difficult to believe. Adjusting Abraham’s lifespan to something more reasonable, such as his nineties,⁶ would still put him in generally the right chronological window but would narrow that window by a few decades and would favor the earlier over the later origin for the Fourteenth Dynasty. There are still large gaps in the archaeological record for this period, and so establishing an incontrovertible chronology for Abraham’s life based on information from the Book of Abraham is not much more feasible beyond this.

3. Ryholt, *Political Situation in Egypt during the Second Intermediate Period*, 5.

4. As argued by John Gee, *An Introduction to the Book of Abraham* (Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2017), 101.

5. The chronology of the Fourteenth Dynasty remains disputed because of “the brutal truth . . . that there is no reliable anchor point for Egyptian history before the New Kingdom [ca. 1550–1069 BC].” As such, “the chronological position of the Fourteenth Dynasty . . . has been a key problem in” reconstructing the history of the end of the Middle Kingdom and the beginning of the Second Intermediate Period. Harco Willems, “The First Intermediate Period and the Middle Kingdom,” in *A Companion to Ancient Egypt*, ed. Alan B. Lloyd, 2 vols. (West Sussex, U.K.: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 1:81, 99. While most Egyptologists accept a late date for the beginning of the Fourteenth Dynasty, Ryholt has argued vigorously for an early date. See the opposing arguments in Ryholt, *Political Situation in Egypt during the Second Intermediate Period*; Daphna Ben-Tor, Susan J. Allen, and James P. Allen, “Review: Seals and Kings,” *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research* 315 (1999): 47–74. While Ryholt’s position remains the minority view among Egyptologists, his theory is nonetheless a viable interpretation of the scarce archaeological evidence that survives for this period.

6. Ancient people surviving to this old age is rare but attested. Pharaoh Ramesses II (ca. 1300–1210 BC) lived to his nineties, for instance. See Kenneth A. Kitchen, *Pharaoh Triumphant: The Life and Times of Ramesses II, King of Egypt* (Warminster, U.K.: Aris and Phillips; Mississauga, Can.: Benben Publications, 1982), 206–7.

“Whether one dates the arrival of the Fourteenth Dynasty toward the beginning or the end of the Thirteenth Dynasty, there would have been a dynastic change during Abraham’s life, with rulers of a different dynasty in Egypt at the time of his visit than had been in charge during his attempted sacrifice.”⁷ Not only were these rulers indeed “partakers of the blood of the Canaanites” as mentioned in the Book of Abraham,⁸ but they may have even had a friendly disposition toward Abraham on account of their shared Semitic ancestry. This, in turn, might account for why Abraham was granted royal privileges, such as the opportunity to teach Pharaoh and his court astronomy (Facsimile 3). Even with a number of remaining uncertainties that should temper our conclusions, small textual details such as those at Abraham 1:21–22 might help us better narrow down a plausible historical timeline for Abraham and situate the Book of Abraham in a plausible ancient context.

Further Reading

Gee, John. “The Book of Abraham in the Ancient World.” In *An Introduction to the Book of Abraham*, 97–105. Salt Lake City: Deseret Book; Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 2017.

———. “Shulem, One of the King’s Principal Waiters.” *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 19 (2016): 383–95.

7. John Gee, “Shulem, One of the King’s Principal Waiters,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 19 (2016): 385.

8. In fact, some modern Egyptologists today still refer to the Fourteenth Dynasty kings as “Canaanites,” including Ryholt, *Political Situation in Egypt during the Second Intermediate Period*, 5.

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 *Agyptos* (Latin: *Aegyptus*). *Agyptos* 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.

The Name of the Lord

On two occasions in the Book of Abraham, the Lord reveals to Abraham his true name: Jehovah. The first incident was when Abraham had a “vision of the Almighty,” wherein “the angel of [the Lord’s] presence” rescued him from being sacrificed in Ur of the Chaldees and made early allusions to a future covenant relationship (Abr. 1:15). “And his voice was unto me: Abraham, Abraham, behold, *my name is Jehovah*, and I have heard thee, and have come down to deliver thee, and to take thee away from thy father’s house, and from all thy kinsfolk, into a strange land which thou knowest not of” (Abr. 1:16, emphasis added). It was on this occasion that the Lord informed Abraham, “Behold, I will lead thee by my hand, and I will take thee, to *put upon thee my name*, even the Priesthood of thy father, and my power shall be over thee. As it was with Noah so shall it be with thee; but through thy ministry *my name shall be known* in the earth forever, for I am thy God” (Abr. 1:18–19, emphasis added).

The second occasion when the Lord revealed his true name was when he made a covenant with Abraham. In the preamble to the covenant,¹ the Lord instructed Abraham:

Arise, and take Lot with thee; for I have purposed to take thee away out of Haran, and to make of thee a minister to *bear my name* in a strange land which I will give unto thy seed after thee for an everlasting possession, when they hearken to my voice. For I am the Lord thy God; I dwell in heaven; the earth is my footstool; I stretch my hand over the sea, and it obeys my voice; I cause the wind and the fire to be my chariot; I say to the mountains—Depart hence—and behold, they are taken away by a whirlwind, in an instant, suddenly. *My name is Jehovah*, and I know

1. See “The Abrahamic Covenant,” 121–24 herein.

the end from the beginning; therefore my hand shall be over thee (Abr. 2:6–8, emphasis added).

Among the promises made to Abraham was that his “name [would be made] great among all nations” should he be true to God’s covenant and that “through [his] name” would all the nations of the earth be blessed; “for as many as receive this Gospel shall be called after [Abraham’s] name” (Abr. 2:9–10). Upon hearing the Lord’s true name of Jehovah for a second time, Abraham thereafter “called again upon *the name* of the Lord” in ritual activity (Abr. 2:20, emphasis added), whereas before he had merely called on the Lord (for example, Abr. 1:15; 2:6, 18).

Why is it significant that the Lord twice revealed his true name to Abraham, and why is there a running motif on the importance of names throughout the text?² Reading these passages in an ancient Near Eastern (and especially ancient Egyptian) context helps answer this question. James P. Allen explains,

Names were much more important to the Egyptians than they are in our society. They were thought to be essential parts of their owners. . . . This is why Egyptians who could afford to do so expended a great deal of effort and resources ensuring that their names would continue to survive in their tombs and on their monuments—and conversely, why the names of some individuals were hacked out of their monuments by their enemies after death. Even during life, people could be essentially deprived of existence by banning their names.³

Names were especially important for royalty. Ronald J. Leprohon observes,

Choosing a particular name was an especially symbolic act for an ancient Egyptian ruler, since names were so significant within the culture. After all, the original act of creation by the primeval god himself was inextricably linked to the act of naming the various entities he created. Kings wished their names to “remain” (*mn*) and be “enduring” (*wꜣḥ*), or for posterity to “give thanks to god” (*dwꜣ nṯr*) in their name. A king could also make his name “perfect” (*nfr*) through “combat” (*ḥꜣ*), which cemented his reputation as a “brave warrior” (*kn*) in “every country.” And that reputation could then be circulated by a court official

2. Compare Abraham 3:3, 13, where Kolob and other astronomical bodies are named, as well as Abraham 5:20–21, where Adam gives names to the animals.

3. James P. Allen, *Middle Egyptian: An Introduction to the Language and Culture of Hieroglyphs*, 3rd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 101.

who “established” (*smn*) or “caused to live” (*sʿnh*) his lord’s name. In fact, courtiers were urged to “fight” (*ʿhʒ*) on behalf of their sovereign’s name.⁴

The importance of names was such that the Egyptian monarch adopted multiple names and titles. According to Leprohon, “since the king was a human being who held a divine office as well as the link between his subjects and the gods, the royal court wished to express the essential features of this unique circumstance. One of the ways it accomplished this was by composing special epithets that the king assumed at his accession, which would serve as a brief statement of his qualities or of his relationship with the divine and the terrestrial world.”⁵

Besides his or her birth name, the monarch adopted four other names that were associated with important deities and announced his or her splendor, divinity, and royal attributes.⁶

Fundamental to the ancient Egyptian mindset was the idea that names were “an intrinsic element and source of power.”⁷ Because “divinities were often said to have secret names guarded from devotees and other deities alike,”⁸ knowing and properly invoking the name of a deity in magical and ritual recitals was therefore crucial in making the performance work. As Egyptologist David Silverman wrote, “To know the name of an individual was to have some control over him or her. . . . The same dynamics surrounded the names of deities. Once the force/power was identified and given a name, prayers and offerings could be made to it; it could be worshipped by name; it could be invoked, implored, even feared and adored. To know the name of a god was to gain some advantage or control over the powers it represented.”⁹

This belief is captured in one ancient Egyptian tale where the sun god Re conceals his true name (even from his daughter, the goddess Isis) to prevent others from magically using it against him. Through clever

4. Ronald J. Leprohon, *The Great Name: Ancient Egyptian Royal Titulary* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2013), 5, citations removed.

5. Leprohon, *Great Name*, 7.

6. Leprohon, *Great Name*, 9–19.

7. Robert K. Ritner, “The Legend of Isis and the Name of Re,” in *The Context of Scripture, Volume I: Canonical Compositions from the Biblical World*, ed. William W. Hallo and K. Lawson Younger Jr. (Leiden, Neth.: Brill, 2003), 33.

8. Ritner, “Legend of Isis and the Name of Re,” 33.

9. David P. Silverman, “Divinity and Deities in Ancient Egypt,” in *Religion in Ancient Egypt: Gods, Myths, and Personal Practice*, ed. Byron E. Shafer (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1991), 28.

trickery, Isis learns the true name of her father, Re, and thereafter uses it to cure him from a snakebite.¹⁰

Names held significant religious importance to the ancient Israelites and to other ancient Near Eastern peoples as well.¹¹ “Throughout the Bible, names are full of meaning. . . . For ancient Israel and the ancient Near East as well as for early Judaism and Christianity, the name of a person, place, or thing was somehow connected to and descriptive of its essence and/or personality.”¹² Abraham himself and his wife, Sarai, both received new names when they entered into a covenant with God. “As for me, behold, my covenant is with thee, and thou shalt be a father of many nations. Neither shall thy name any more be called Abram, but thy name shall be Abraham; for a father of many nations have I made thee. . . . As for Sarai thy wife, thou shalt not call her name Sarai, but Sarah shall her name be” (Gen. 17:4–5, 15). In Genesis, the patriarch Jacob received his new name of Israel after wrestling a divine messenger who himself refused to disclose his name (Gen. 32:22–32). In Exodus, Moses received his prophetic commission to rescue the children of Israel from Egyptian bondage only after he received a revelation of the Lord’s true name on the “mountain of God” (Ex. 3:1, 13–15).

The latter episode is especially germane to the revelation of the Lord’s true name to Abraham in the Book of Abraham since in both instances the revelation informed the prophet of deeper truths about the relationship God has with his covenant people. In the book of Exodus,

God reveals the divine name of YHWH [Jehovah] to Moses (Exod. 3:6; 6:2). God acknowledges a special relationship with Moses as the God of his father (Exod. 3:6), who created a covenant with his ancestors (Exod. 6:4). God promises to be with Moses in a unique and intimate way (Exod. 3:12; 7:1), and clarifies that the commission of Moses as liberator is because YHWH also has a special relationship with Israel (Exod. 3:8; 6:7–8). The two commissions [of Moses in Exodus 3:1–4:17 and 6:1–7:7] provide the foundation for the development of Israelite religion in the wilderness.¹³

10. Ritner, “Legend of Isis and the Name of Re,” 33–34; Geraldine Pinch, *Egyptian Mythology: A Guide to the Gods, Goddesses, and Traditions of Ancient Egypt* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 69–71.

11. See H. B. Huffmon, “Name,” in *Dictionary of Deities and Demons in the Bible*, ed. Karel van der Toorn, Bob Becking, and Pieter W. van der Horst, 2nd ed. (Leiden, Neth.: Brill; Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1999), 610–12.

12. Russell Fuller, “Names and Namegiving,” in *The Oxford Companion to the Bible*, ed. Bruce M. Metzger and Michael D. Coogan (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 545.

13. Thomas B. Dozeman, “Exodus,” in *The Fortress Commentary on the Bible: The Old Testament and Apocrypha*, ed. Gale A. Yee, Hugh R. Page Jr., and Matthew J. M. Coomber (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2014), 147.

Not unlike the Egyptian evidence seen above, by knowing the true name of God through revelation, Moses could, in effect, divine its deeper symbolic meaning and tap into its divine power.¹⁴ Sigmund Mowinckel notes,

In the opinion of the ancient Israelites names were symbolic. . . . Symbolic not only with regard to their actual and literal signification, but also with regard to all the symbolic meanings that might be found in them. . . . To find the deeper, hidden meaning of the names of the gods was one of the tasks of the “theologians” of those days. A man who knows the “real” deeper meaning of the name of a god, really “knows the god” in question. . . . What [Exodus 3] tells us is that this deeper meaning of the name was revealed to Moses by God himself. Moses at once understands that the mysterious words refer to the name of Yahweh [Jehovah], and also that the god who speaks to him from the burning bush and can reveal the hidden meaning of the Name, must certainly be Yahweh himself, and such a revelation is sufficient proof that Yahweh has sent him.¹⁵

To be sure, the Lord did not reveal his true name to Abraham so that the patriarch could manipulate or control him, as it was expected one could do in ancient Egyptian magical practice. Rather, as read in the context of Abraham’s narrative, the Lord disclosed his true name in a sacred, intimate covenant setting for the purpose of blessing the nations of the earth. Nonetheless, the text does indicate that after the Lord’s name was revealed to Abraham, he was able to invoke it in the performance of covenant rituals, thereby making those rituals potent and the covenant binding.¹⁶

Knowing something about the religious, mythical, and symbolic significance of names in the world of the ancient Near East thus helps us

14. Compare Exodus 20:24 and 23:13, where the Lord instructs that invoking his name in ritual contexts will ensure blessings and forbids the names of other gods from being invoked. “On the one hand, invoking the name of Yahweh results in his presence and blessing, but on the other hand, a warning and threat are given against invoking the name of other gods.” John Van Seters, *A Law Book for the Diaspora: Revision in the Study of the Covenant Code* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 62.

15. Sigmund Mowinckel, “The Name of the God of Moses,” *Hebrew Union College Annual* 32 (1961): 125–26.

16. On this point, it is also significant that gods were invoked as witnesses in covenant treaties between ancient Near Eastern potentates. So too were Jehovah and the host of heaven invoked as witnesses in biblical texts. Donald L. Magnetti, “Function of the Oath in the Ancient Near Eastern International Treaty,” *American Journal of International Law* 72, no. 4 (October 1978): 815, 818, 821–22, 824–26; David E. Bokovoy, “Invoking the Council as Witnesses in Amos 3:13,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 127, no. 1 (Spring 2008): 37–51; and Meredith G. Kline, *Treaty of the Great King: The Covenant Structure of Deuteronomy; Studies and Commentary* (Eugene, Ore.: Wipf and Stock, 2012), 15, 19.

understand why the Lord revealed his name to Abraham in this specific narrative and theological framework. It also provides an ancient context that makes sense of Abraham's account. The Lord revealed his true name to ratify his covenant with Abraham and to make the attending priesthood power efficacious: "Behold, I will lead thee by my hand, and I will take thee, to put upon thee my name, even the Priesthood of thy father, and my power shall be over thee" (Abr. 1:18; compare Abr. 2:9, 11).

Further Reading

- Hardison, Amy B. "Theophany on Sinai." In *Ascending the Mountain of the Lord: Temple, Praise, and Worship in the Old Testament*, edited by David Rolph Seely, Jeffrey R. Chadwick, and Matthew J. Grey, 218–31. Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2013.
- Pike, Dana M. "The Name and Titles of God in the Old Testament." *Religious Educator* 11, no. 1 (2010): 17–31.

Abraham's Converts in Haran

In the Genesis account of Abraham's sojourning, the text indicates that at the outset of his journey the patriarch "took Sarai his wife, and Lot his brother's son, and all their substance that they had gathered, and the souls that they had gotten in Haran; and they went forth to go into the land of Canaan; and into the land of Canaan they came" (Gen. 12:5). This passage is paralleled in the Book of Abraham, with one small but important difference. It reads, "And I took Sarai, whom I took to wife when I was in Ur, in Chaldea, and Lot, my brother's son, and all our substance that we had gathered, and the souls that we had *won* in Haran, and came forth in the way to the land of Canaan, and dwelt in tents as we came on our way" (Abr. 2:15, emphasis added). As Hugh Nibley rightly recognized, the Book of Abraham thus portrays the patriarch as an exemplary missionary (compare Abr. 1:7).¹

At first glance, the phrase in Genesis 12:5 ("and the souls that they had gotten in Haran") could appear to be depicting the patriarch's acquisition of bonded servants or slaves.² This, however, is not the only possible

1. 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: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, 2009), 441–44.

2. Thus, Robert Alter, who renders verse 5 so: "And Abram took Sarai his wife and Lot his nephew and all the goods they had gotten and the folk they had bought in Haran, and they set out on the way to the land of Canaan, and they came to the land of Canaan." Although Alter believes this verse depicts Abraham's involvement in slavery, he stresses that the sort of slavery practiced in the Bible (and throughout much of the ancient Near East) "was not the sort of chattel slavery later practiced in North America. These slaves had certain limited rights, could be given great responsibility, and were not thought to lose their personhood." Robert Alter, *The Hebrew Bible, Volume 1: The Five Books of Moses, a Translation with Commentary* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2019), 41.

interpretation of this somewhat obscure passage. The Hebrew word rendered “substance” in the KJV (*rēkūš*) means something more like “property” and usually refers to cattle and herds but also seems to apply to the household and its members (compare Gen. 31:18; 36:6; 46:6).³ It appears to derive from an Akkadian word that as a verb (*rakāsu*) means “to bind” and as a noun (*riksu*) means both a “band, belt,” and an “agreement, treaty.”⁴ In other words, it could be referring to those in Haran whom Abraham and his family bound by covenant. In this regard, the “conversion” of members of the local community at Haran may have looked something like the attitude Ruth, a Moabite, adopted when she pledged loyalty to her mother-in-law, Naomi, an Israelite: “Whither thou goest, I will go; and where thou lodgest, I will lodge: thy people shall be my people, and thy God my God” (Ruth 1:16).

As Nibley has noted and discussed,⁵ there is a long, sustained interpretative tradition within Judaism (and later Islam) that reads Genesis 12:5 in exactly this manner.⁶ In Targum Neofiti and Targum Pseudo-Jonathan (Aramaic translations and expansions of the Bible), for example, Genesis 12:5 is rendered to read that Abraham “converted” or “made proselytes” (*gyyr*) of the inhabitants of Haran.⁷ In Targum Onqelos, the residents of Haran are depicted as having been “subjected to the Law” (*ša’ābiydu lə’orāytā’*) by Abraham and are thus counted as his converts.⁸ The Targumic interpreters, accordingly, understood Genesis 12:5 exactly as depicting “the proselytizing activity of Abraham.”⁹

3. Francis Brown, S. R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs, *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1907), 940; John Gee, “The Wanderings of Abraham,” in *From Creation to Sinai: The Old Testament through the Lens of the Restoration*, ed. Daniel L. Belnap and Aaron P. Schade (Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2021), 261–62.

4. Jeremy Black, Andrew George, and Nicholas Postgate, eds., *A Concise Dictionary of Akkadian* (Wiesbaden, Ger.: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2000), 297, 304.

5. Nibley, *Approach to the Book of Abraham*, 441–44.

6. See the sources gathered and catalogued in John A. Tvedtnes, Brian M. Hauglid, and John Gee, eds., *Traditions about the Early Life of Abraham* (Provo, Utah: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies: 2001), 544.

7. See Martin McNamara, trans., *Targum Neofiti 1: Genesis*, The Aramaic Bible 1A (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 1992), 86; and Michael Maher, trans., *Targum Pseudo-Jonathan: Genesis*, The Aramaic Bible 1B (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 1992), 52.

8. Bernard Grossfeld, trans., *The Targum Onqelos to Genesis*, The Aramaic Bible 6 (Wilmington, Del.: Michael Glazier, 1988), 63.

9. Maher, *Targum Pseudo-Jonathan*, 52 n. 6; compare M. Delcor, “La portée chronologique de quelques interprétations du Targoum Néophyti contenues dans le cycle d’Abraham,” *Journal for the Study of Judaism* 1, no. 2 (1970): 106–8.

This interpretation was continued into the rabbinic period¹⁰ and was notably picked up in texts such as the Bereshit Rabbah (*Lekh Lekha* 39:14) and the Zohar (*Lekh Lekha* 1:85b).¹¹

In his commentary on the book of Genesis, the Jewish scholar Umberto Cassuto argued that the “souls” (“lives,” “persons”; *nepes*) of Genesis 12:5 could not be slaves for a variety of reasons; he preferred to follow the rabbinic interpretation that the passage offers “an allusion to proselytes (Abram converted the men, and Sarah the women).” He postulated that the rabbinic interpretation “approximates to the actual meaning of the text” and, what’s more, “that we have here one of those verses that point to the theme of an ancient tradition that was not indeed incorporated in the Torah in its entirety, but was known to the Israelites.”¹² Strikingly, Cassuto’s own translation of Genesis 12:5 parallels the Book of Abraham almost exactly: “And the souls that they had won in Haran.”¹³

The subtle change in the Book of Abraham’s parallel passage to Genesis 12:5, accordingly, finds support both from ancient sources and from modern scholarship. Beyond this, the text provides greater insight to the life of Abraham for the appreciation of Latter-day Saints: the patriarch was a great missionary who was concerned with extending the blessings of the covenant to God’s children, as was part of the obligations of the covenant he took upon himself (compare Gal. 3:6–9; Abr. 1:1–3; 2:9–11). As Elder George Reynolds recognized, “Thus we find that Abraham, having sought for the privilege of becoming a preacher of righteousness, in answer to his desire the priesthood was given to him with the command to magnify it. It is not probable that such a man would fail in the hour

10. Martin Goodman, “Proselytising in Rabbinic Judaism,” *Journal of Jewish Studies* 40, no. 2 (1989): 175–85, esp. 178–79, 182–83; Martin Goodman, *Mission and Conversion: Proselytizing in the Religious History of the Roman Empire* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), 89, 130, 144–45.

11. H. Freedman and Maurice Simon, trans., *Midrash Rabbah*, vol. 1 (London: Soncino Press, 1939), 324; Daniel C. Matt, trans., *The Zohar, Volume 2* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2004), 45.

12. Umberto Cassuto, *A Commentary on the Book of Genesis, Part Two: From Noah to Abraham* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, The Hebrew University, 1964), 319; compare Irving Jacobs, *The Midrashic Process: Tradition and Interpretation in Rabbinic Judaism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 124–25 n. 125, 188.

13. Cassuto, *Commentary on the Book of Genesis*, 319. Incidentally, rabbinic authorities also understood Genesis 21:33 as a reference to Abraham’s proselytizing. See C. T. R. Hayward, “Abraham as Proselytizer at Beer-Sheba in the Targums of the Pentateuch,” in *Targums and the Transmission of Scripture into Judaism and Christianity*, Studies in the Aramaic Interpretations of Scripture 10 (Leiden, Neth.: Brill, 2010), 17–34.

of action. . . . That he did proclaim the law of the Lord where he went, is evidenced [in his record].”¹⁴

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14. George Reynolds, *The Book of Abraham: Its Authenticity Established as a Divine and Ancient Record* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News, 1879), 10; compare George Reynolds, “The Book of Abraham—It’s Genuineness Established,” *Latter-day Saints’ Millennial Star* 41, no. 3 (January 20, 1879): 38.

The Plains of Moreh

The second chapter of the Book of Abraham parallels content found in Genesis 12. Both texts narrate the patriarch's flight into Canaan and provide specific geographic details about the route he and his family took as they fled Haran (Abr. 2:14–18; Gen. 12:4–9). The Book of Abraham describes Abraham as “journey[ing] from Haran by the way of Jershon, to come to the land of Canaan” (Abr. 2:16).¹ Thereafter, Abraham and his party “passed from Jershon through the land unto the place of Sechem” (Abr. 2:18).² This Sechem, the text says, “was situated in the plains of Moreh,” which themselves were located within “the borders of the land of the Canaanites.” Here Abraham “offered sacrifice . . . in the plains of Moreh, and called on the Lord devoutly.” He did this, he says, because he discovered that the land of Canaan was an “idolatrous nation” (Abr. 2:18). As read in both Genesis and the Book of Abraham, it is here that Abraham received a theophany of the Lord with the promise “unto thy seed will I give this land” (Abr. 2:19; compare Gen. 12:7).

One of these named toponyms deserves special comment. The mention of the *plains* of Moreh at Abraham 2:18 corresponds to the *plain* (singular) of Moreh named at KJV Genesis 12:6 (compare Deut. 11:30). As scholars have long recognized, however, the rendering of “plain” in

1. The location of this Jershon is unknown and not mentioned in the corresponding chapter, Genesis 12. From the description in the text, it appears to lie somewhere between Haran in northern Mesopotamia and Canaan, placing it, probably, somewhere in modern Syria or Lebanon. Obviously, this Jershon should not be confused with the New World Jershon of the Book of Mormon (Alma 27:22–24).

2. Sechem (or, variously, Shechem or Sicheim) is widely identified with Tel Balata in the modern West Bank and is attested in Egyptian sources from Abraham's day. K. A. Kitchen, *On the Reliability of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2006), 186, 335–36; and Phyllis Saretta, *Asiatics in Middle Kingdom Egypt: Perceptions and Reality* (London: Bloomsbury, 2016), 20, 185.

the KJV is an error.³ The Hebrew word mistranslated as “plain” in the KJV (*’ēlôn*) actually means “oak” or “terebinth.”⁴ Even the name “Moreh” (rendered in both Genesis and the Book of Abraham as a proper noun) might more technically be rendered “oracle, diviner, teacher” in order to produce a name like “the teacher’s terebinth” or “the oracle oak” for the location.⁵ It would appear that with “plains of Moreh,” Joseph Smith was following the KJV in his own rendering of Abraham 2:18. That the Prophet would at times follow the KJV in his translation of the Book of Abraham is not surprising given the dependence on the KJV seen in his translation of the Book of Mormon.⁶

Although the Book of Abraham follows the KJV with the less-accurate rendition of this passage, it nevertheless departs from the KJV in a subtle and significant way. As mentioned above, the Book of Abraham explicitly mentions that upon arriving at Sechem in the plains of Moreh—the first named location in Canaan—Abraham was shocked to discover that the land of Canaan was an “idolatrous nation” (Abr. 2:18). This detail is left unmentioned in the KJV, which merely notes that “the Canaanite was then in the land” (Gen. 12:6). This idolatry prompted Abraham to offer sacrifices and call on the Lord, details once again missing from Genesis.⁷

How is this significant for the Book of Abraham? As multiple scholars have observed, it is very likely that the “oak of Moreh” (the “oracle

3. Melvin Hunt, “Moreh,” in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. David Noel Freedman, 6 vols. (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 4:904. This error was not unique to the KJV. The Great Bible (1539), Bishops’ Bible (1568), and Geneva Bible (1599) also read “plain of Moreh” at Genesis 12:6.

4. Ludwig Koehler and Walter Baumgartner, *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*, trans. M. E. J. Richardson, 2 vols. (Leiden, Neth.: Brill, 1994), 1:54; E. A. Speiser, *Genesis*, The Anchor Yale Bible (New York: Doubleday, 1964), 86–87 n. 6; G. Johannes Botterweck, Helmer Ringgren, and Heinz-Josef Fabry, eds., *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, trans. David E. Green, 17 vols. (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1974–2021), 6:346. English Bibles preceding the KJV that captured the more accurate reading “oak of Moreh” include the Tyndale Bible (1530), Coverdale Bible (1535), and the Matthew Bible (1537).

5. Speiser, *Genesis*, 87 n. 6; Botterweck, Ringgren, and Fabry, *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, 6:346; and J. D. Douglas and Merrill C. Tenney, *Zondervan Illustrated Bible Dictionary*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 2011), 971.

6. See Royal Skousen, “The History of the Book of Mormon Text: Parts 5 and 6 of Volume 3 of the Critical Text,” *BYU Studies Quarterly* 59, no. 1 (2020): 87–128; and Royal Skousen, “The Language of the Original Text of the Book of Mormon,” *BYU Studies Quarterly* 57, no. 3 (2018): 81–110.

7. In Genesis 12, Abraham builds an altar to the Lord only after his theophany in verse 7.

oak”) was a local Canaanite cult site—that is, a sacred or holy tree that functioned as an oracular shrine or Canaanite sanctuary.⁸ “The oak of Moreh clearly belonged to the cultic center at Shechem. . . . The name of the oak . . . suggests that it functioned as an oracular tree.”⁹ It was, in effect, “a site of divination.”¹⁰ Speiser notes that one ancient Jewish source, Targum Onqelos, recognized this and so rendered *’elôn* as “plain” (Aramaic: *meyšar*) instead of “oak,” probably to “avoid the pagan implications of a sacred tree.”¹¹

The Book of Abraham’s added detail about the patriarch’s encounter with Canaanite idolatry also reinforces the point made by Matthew L. Bowen: “Substantial parts of Genesis 12–22 [and Abraham 2] illustrate how Abraham ‘templifies’ the Promised Land—its re-creation as sacred space—by Abraham’s building altars at Shechem, Mamre/Hebron, Bethel, and Moriah.”¹² As told in the Book of Abraham, the idolatry Abraham confronted at the plains (oak) of Moreh near Shechem in Canaan prompted him to consecrate the land by erecting an altar. This he would repeat, as Bowen notes, at other Canaanite locations according to the biblical record (Gen. 12:7–8; 13:4, 18; 22:9). In response, the Lord appeared to Abraham and offered him his own (true) oracle about

8. Douglas and Tenney, *Zondervan Illustrated Bible Dictionary*, 971; Botterweck, Ringgren, and Fabry, *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, 6:346; Nahum Sarna, *The JPS Torah Commentary: Genesis* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1989), 91; Hunt, “Moreh,” 4:904; and K. Nielsen, “Oak,” in *Dictionary of Deities and Demons of the Bible*, ed. Karel van der Toorn, Bob Becking, and Pieter W. van der Horst (Leiden, Neth.: Brill, 1999), 637–38.

9. Botterweck, Ringgren, and Fabry, *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, 11:271; compare R. P. Dugan, “Moreh, Oak of,” in *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, ed. Geoffrey W. Bromiley, 4 vols. (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1986), 3:412, who notes, “The name of the tree or wood may indicate that it was a place to consult a teacher or Canaanite abode of ancestral spirits; or perhaps the name refers to the theophany that occurred there.”

10. Susan Ackerman, “Between Athens and Jerusalem, on the Wings of a Dove?,” in *Sibyls, Scriptures, and Scrolls: John Collins at Seventy*, ed. Joel Baden, Hindy Najman, and Eibert J. C. Tigchelaar (Leiden, Neth.: Brill, 2017), 10.

11. Speiser, *Genesis*, 86; compare Alexander Sperber, ed., *The Bible in Aramaic, Volume 1: The Pentateuch according to Targum Onkelos* (Leiden, Neth.: Brill, 2004), 17; and Edward M. Cook, *A Glossary of Targum Onkelos* (Leiden, Neth.: Brill, 2008), 152.

12. Matthew L. Bowen, “‘Where I Will Meet You’: The Convergence of Sacred Time and Sacred Space as the Etiological Function of the Tent of Meeting,” in *Sacred Time, Sacred Space, and Sacred Meaning: Proceedings of the Third Interpreter Foundation Matthew B. Brown Memorial Conference, 5 November 2016*, ed. Stephen D. Ricks and Jeffrey M. Bradshaw, *The Temple on Mount Zion 4* (Orem, Utah: Interpreter Foundation; Salt Lake City: Eborn Books, 2020), 10.

his seed inheriting the land of Canaan at the place called, literally, the “oracle oak” (Abr. 2:19; Gen. 12:7).¹³

None of this is obvious from reading the King James translation of Genesis 12. So even if the translation of the Book of Abraham is in some degree dependent on the KJV, the underlying narrative captures something deeper and more authentic to the ancient world of Abraham.

Further Reading

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13. As Avram Shannon elaborates, “One of the first things Abraham does when he comes into the land of Canaan is to build an altar at Shechem (Genesis 12:6). In fact, Abraham’s itinerary through the land of Canaan is characterized by his building of altars, many of which become holy places or other important locations in later Israelite history. . . . These altars mark places of divine promise and interaction, showing places where Abraham interacts with his family, God, and others.” Avram R. Shannon, “Abraham: A Man of Relationships,” in *From Creation to Sinai: The Old Testament through the Lens of the Restoration*, ed. Daniel L. Belnap and Aaron P. Schade (Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2021), 285.

The Abrahamic Covenant

One of the important doctrinal contributions of the Book of Abraham is its elaboration on the nature of the Abrahamic covenant (Abr. 2:6–11).¹ While some details about the Abrahamic covenant can be read in the book of Genesis (12:1–5; compare 26:1–4, 24; 28; 35:9–13; 48:3–4), it is in the Book of Abraham where additional important aspects about this covenant are revealed. The main significance of the Abrahamic covenant as expanded upon in the Book of Abraham is that it involves a “right to the priesthood . . . as the essence of Abraham’s inheritance.”² Indeed, the covenant Abraham entered into with God, according to the text, encompassed specific blessings and priesthood responsibilities and included a charge to Abraham’s descendants to share the gospel with all the families of the earth.

1. See Monte S. Nyman, “The Covenant of Abraham,” in *The Pearl of Great Price: Revelations from God*, ed. H. Donl Peterson and Charles D. Tate Jr. (Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 1989), 155–70; Kent P. Jackson, *The Restored Gospel and the Book of Genesis* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2001), 127–52; Michael Goodman, “The Abrahamic Covenant: A Foundational Theme for the Old Testament,” *Religious Educator* 4, no. 3 (2003): 43–53; and Terryl Givens with Brian M. Hauglid, *The Pearl of Greatest Price: Mormonism’s Most Controversial Scripture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), 121–25. For important recent treatments on covenants in the scriptures, including the Abrahamic covenants, see Kerry Muhlestein, Joshua M. Sears, and Avram R. Shannon, “New and Everlasting: The Relationship between Gospel Covenants in History,” *Religious Educator* 21, no. 2 (2020): 21–40; Kerry Muhlestein, “Recognizing the Everlasting Covenant in the Scriptures,” *Religious Educator* 21, no. 2 (2020): 41–71; and Shon D. Hopkin, “The Covenant among Covenants: The Abrahamic Covenant and Biblical Covenant Making,” in *From Creation to Sinai: The Old Testament through the Lens of the Restoration*, ed. Daniel L. Belnap and Aaron P. Schade (Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2021), 237–49.

2. Givens with Hauglid, *Pearl of Greatest Price*, 122.

Also significant is that the Abrahamic covenant, as presented in the Book of Abraham, “has several features that appear in other covenants and treaties of the ancient world. Treaties and covenants in Abraham’s day typically have a preamble or title, stipulations, an oath or other solemn ceremony, and, more rarely, curses conditional on violation of the covenant. . . . The covenant in the Book of Abraham follows the pattern for Abraham’s day.”³ This should not come as a surprise, since God communicates with his children “after the manner of their language, that they might come to understanding” (D&C 1:24; compare 2 Ne. 31:3).⁴ So if Abraham were to enter into a covenant with God, it would not be unusual for the structure of that covenant to resemble the way people made covenants and treaties in his day, or at the very least for Abraham to have understood and structured his covenant with God in those terms.

With this in mind, and thanks to the comparative data uncovered by scholars over the past century that help us better understand the form and content of ancient covenants,⁵ the Abrahamic covenant as depicted in the Book of Abraham can be structured as follows:

Ancient Covenant Pattern Abraham 2:6–11

Solemn Ceremony

But I, Abraham, and Lot, my brother’s son, prayed unto the Lord, and the Lord appeared unto me, and said unto me:

Preamble

Arise, and take Lot with thee; for I have purposed to take thee away out of Haran, and to make of thee a minister to bear my name in a strange land which I will give unto thy seed after thee for an everlasting possession, when they hearken to my voice. For I am the Lord thy God; I dwell in heaven; the earth is my footstool; I stretch my hand over the sea, and it obeys my voice; I cause the wind and the fire to be my chariot; I say to the mountains—Depart hence—and behold, they are taken away by a whirlwind, in an instant, suddenly. My name is Jehovah, and I know the end from the beginning; therefore my hand shall be over thee.

3. John Gee, *An Introduction to the Book of Abraham* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book; Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 2017), 108–9.

4. See also the insightful thoughts offered by Mark Alan Wright, “According to Their Language, unto Their Understanding”: The Cultural Context of Hierophanies and Theophanies in Latter-day Saint Canon,” *Studies in the Bible and Antiquity* 3 (2011): 51–65, esp. 55–58.

5. See the invaluable Kenneth A. Kitchen and Paul J. N. Lawrence, *Treaty, Law, and Covenant in the Ancient Near East*, 3 vols. (Wiesbaden, Ger.: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2012).

Ancient Covenant Pattern Abraham 2:6–11

Stipulations

And I will make of thee a great nation, and I will bless thee above measure, and make thy name great among all nations, and thou shalt be a blessing unto thy seed after thee, that in their hands they shall bear this ministry and Priesthood unto all nations; and I will bless them through thy name; for as many as receive this Gospel shall be called after thy name, and shall be accounted thy seed, and shall rise up and bless thee, as their father; and I will bless them that bless thee, and curse them that curse thee; and in thee (that is, in thy Priesthood) and in thy seed (that is, thy Priesthood), for I give unto thee a promise that this right shall continue in thee, and in thy seed after thee (that is to say, the literal seed, or the seed of the body) shall all the families of the earth be blessed, even with the blessings of the Gospel, which are the blessings of salvation, even of life eternal.

This structure helps make sense of the content of Abraham’s covenant and shows that “the covenant in the Book of Abraham follows the pattern of treaties and covenants in his day.”⁶ So while the content of the Abrahamic covenant is what is most important for Latter-day Saints today,⁷ the form or structure of the covenant as depicted in the Book of Abraham is one way the text can be grounded in the ancient world from which it purports to derive.

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6. Gee, *Introduction to the Book of Abraham*, 111.

7. See Russell M. Nelson, “The Gathering of Scattered Israel,” *Ensign* 36, no. 11 (November 2006): 79–81.

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Did Abraham Lie about His Wife, Sarai?

Before he journeyed into Egypt, Abraham was instructed by God: “Behold, Sarai [later Sarah], thy wife, is a very fair woman to look upon; therefore it shall come to pass, when the Egyptians shall see her, they will say—she is his wife; and they will kill you, but they will save her alive; therefore see that ye do on this wise: Let her say unto the Egyptians, she is thy sister, and thy soul shall live” (Abr. 2:22–23).

This passage is paralleled in Genesis 12:10–13.¹ The rationale behind Abraham’s actions is clear enough. He was fearful that Sarai’s beauty would endanger him when the couple arrived in a strange, foreign land. A key difference between the accounts in Genesis and the Book of Abraham, however, is that the Book of Abraham portrays God as instructing Abraham to engage in the subterfuge, a detail not found in the Genesis account. The question that naturally arises is whether Abraham was lying by saying Sarai was his sister instead of his wife,² and, if he was, whether that lie was morally justified.³ Some readers of the Book of Abraham are

1. This so-called “sister/wife” motif is picked up again at Genesis 20:1–18 and Genesis 26:6–11 but involves different characters. For some perspective on this motif, see Gaye Strathearn, “The Wife/Sister Experience: Pharaoh’s Introduction to Jehovah,” in *Sperry Symposium Classics: The Old Testament*, ed. Paul Y. Hoskisson (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book; Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 2005), 100–116; and James K. Hoffmeier, “The Wives’ Tales of Genesis 12, 20, and 26 and the Covenants at Beer-Sheba,” *Tyndale Bulletin* 43, no. 1 (1992): 81–100.

2. See Yael Shemesh, “Lies by Prophets and Other Lies in the Hebrew Bible,” *Journal of Ancient Near Eastern Society* 29 (2002): 88–89; and Shira Weiss, *Ethical Ambiguity in the Hebrew Bible: Philosophical Analysis of Scriptural Narrative* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 130–38.

3. Duane Boyce, “Why Abraham Was Not Wrong to Lie,” *BYU Studies Quarterly* 61, no. 3 (2022): 5–27, has recently defended the rightness of Abraham’s action by making the philosophical argument that in some circumstances lying and deception are not

especially troubled by what appears to be God commanding Abraham to lie.

One important thing to keep in mind is that Genesis 20:12 identifies Sarai as Abraham's half-sister. "So it is at least possible that Sarah belonged to Abraham's extended family and was thus considered to be his 'sister' in the sense of a near blood relative."⁴ With this in mind, Abraham appears to have been using somewhat ambiguous terminology and not necessarily making an outright false statement.⁵ This ambiguous language may also have been playing on Mesopotamian legal definitions, but this point is debated.⁶

Whether or not this tactic would have played well in a Mesopotamian context, it would have worked in ancient Egyptian, since in that language "a wife was often called the 'sister' (*snt*) of her husband, but not because they had the same parents: instead, the term was one of

only morally permissible but perhaps even expedient and challenges the assumption that lying is always or categorically immoral. Boyce's argument deserves to be carefully evaluated on its philosophical merits (something which falls outside the scope of this treatment that focuses on the ancient context for Abraham's life). For now, one thing we might be able to say is that the evidence adduced here helps us better understand that Abraham's actions in his ancient cultural setting may not necessarily be at odds with Boyce's moral argumentation and may in fact complement it. Contrary to Boyce, "Why Abraham Was Not Wrong to Lie," 6–7, we do not necessarily see how his moral arguments for the rightness of Abraham's lie obviate the need to first consider the patriarch's words and actions in their immediate ancient setting.

4. Strathearn, "Wife/Sister Experience," 103. See additionally the remarks in Hugh Nibley, *Abraham in Egypt*, 2nd ed., ed. Gary P. Gillum, 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), 361–63.

5. "[The biblical text] is implying that [Abraham] did not lie to Abimelech [and also Pharaoh in Genesis 12:13] but only concealed vital information from him." Shemesh, "Lies by Prophets and Other Lies in the Hebrew Bible," 88.

6. Older scholarship favored reading the sister-wife motif in Genesis in light of the discoveries of Mesopotamian legal texts that seemed to indicate that a man could legally adopt his wife as a sister to further ensure marital security. See, for example, E. A. Speiser, *Genesis*, The Anchor Yale Bible (New York: Doubleday, 1964), 91–94; and Nahum M. Sarna, *Understanding Genesis: The World of the Bible in the Light of History* (New York: Schocken Books, 1970), 102–3. This reading and understanding of the Mesopotamian legal material, however, would later be challenged. See, for instance, Samuel Greengus, "Sisterhood Adoption at Nuzi and the 'Wife-Sister' in Genesis," *Hebrew Union College Annual* 46, Centennial Issue (1975): 5–31; Iain Provan, V. Philips Long, and Tremper Longman III, *A Biblical History of Israel* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003), 113–15; and Barry L. Eichler, "On Reading Genesis 12:10–20," in *Tehillah le-Moshe: Biblical and Judaic Studies in Honor of Moshe Greenberg*, ed. Mordechai Cogan, Barry L. Eichler, and Jeffrey H. Tigay (Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 1997), 24–26.

affection, indicating that the family relationship between husband and wife by marriage was as close as that between real brother and sister.”⁷ This appears to reinforce the point that Abraham could be viewed as taking advantage of an ambiguity that would have worked especially well in thwarting the murderous intentions of the Egyptians. “The custom of referring to one’s wife (*hm.t*) as one’s sister (*sn.t*)” in ancient Egyptian culture therefore takes on deep significance for this passage. “For an Egyptian audience, Abram’s calling Sarai his sister would not have precluded her being his wife.”⁸

Finally, it is noteworthy that a text from the Dead Sea Scrolls called the Genesis Apocryphon depicts Abraham being warned in a dream of the danger he faced when traveling into Egypt because of Sarai’s beauty. This in turn prompted his equivocation with Pharaoh.⁹ While this text does not overtly say that God told Abraham to “lie” about his relationship with Sarai, it heavily implies that he was divinely forewarned of the situation. This harmonizes nicely with the account in the Book of Abraham.

Further Reading

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7. James P. Allen, *Middle Egyptian: An Introduction to the Language and Culture of Hieroglyphs*, 3rd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 41. Compare Rainer Hannig, *Ägyptisches Wörterbuch I: Altes Reich und Erste Zwischenzeit* (Mainz, Ger.: Verlag Philipp von Zabern, 2003), 1153–54; and Rainer Hannig, *Ägyptisches Wörterbuch II: Mittleres Reich und Zweite Zwischenzeit* (Mainz, Ger.: Verlag Philipp von Zabern, 2003), 2247–53.

8. Eichler, “On Reading Genesis 12:10–20,” 34 n. 43; compare Nahum Sarna, *The JPS Torah Commentary: Genesis* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1989), 95; Nibley, *Abraham in Egypt*, 361–63; and John Gee, *An Introduction to the Book of Abraham* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book; Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 2017), 102.

9. John A. Tvedtnes, Brian M. Hauglid, and John Gee, eds., *Traditions about the Early Life of Abraham* (Provo, Utah: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 2001), 26–29; Daniel A. Machiela, *The Dead Sea Genesis Apocryphon: A New Text and Translation with Introduction and Special Treatment of Columns 13–17* (Leiden, Neth.: Brill, 2009), 70–72; James L. Kugel, *Traditions of the Bible: A Guide to the Bible as It Was at the Start of the Common Era* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1998), 255–56.

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Strathearn, Gaye. "The Wife/Sister Experience: Pharaoh's Introduction to Jehovah." In *Sperry Symposium Classics: The Old Testament*, edited by Paul Y. Hoskisson, 100–116. Salt Lake City: Deseret Book; Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 2005.

Abraham the Seer

A careful reading of the Book of Abraham reveals subtle literary and narrative elements in the text that might otherwise go unappreciated. For instance, a running leitmotif—a recurring theme or concept—throughout the Book of Abraham is that of Abraham as a seer, or someone who sees or otherwise has a visual interaction with divine manifestation (typically or usually aided by a divinatory device such as a seer stone).¹ As seen in both the mention of Abraham’s possession and use of the Urim and Thummim (Abr. 3:1) as well as the repeated use of verbs such as *see* and *show* (in their various forms), the Book of Abraham captures this imagery in both explicit and subtle ways.

The very first verse of the Book of Abraham launches this leitmotif that is carried throughout the text: “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, emphasis added). This is emphasized again when the Lord instructs, “Abraham, get thee out of thy country, and from thy kindred, and from thy father’s house, unto a land that I will *show* thee” (Abr. 2:3, emphasis added). Rather than haphazardly deciding to find a new land of promise on a whim, Abraham is depicted instead as having the visionary foresight to relocate.

The third chapter of the Book of Abraham greatly expands on this leitmotif as it narrates Abraham’s vision of the cosmos and the pre-mortal world. As mentioned, the text overtly mentions that Abraham had a seer’s instrument (the Urim and Thummim), which he consulted to communicate with God. “And I, Abraham, had the Urim and

1. In the Latter-day Saint canon, seers are defined as those who use divinely prepared stones to receive communication from God, primarily for the purpose of translating sacred records. See, for example, Mosiah 8:13–17; JS–H 1:34–35.

Thummim, which the Lord my God had given unto me, in Ur of the Chaldees; and I *saw* the stars, that they were very great, and that one of them was nearest unto the throne of God; and there were many great ones which were near unto it” (Abr. 3:1–2, emphasis added). Verbs of seeing or revelation that trigger the leitmotif are employed throughout the rest of the chapter (and in Abraham’s vision of Creation) following these introductory verses:

“And the Lord said unto me: Now, Abraham, these two facts exist, behold *thine eyes see it*” (Abr. 3:6, emphasis added).

“Thus I, Abraham, talked with the Lord, *face to face*, as one man talketh with another; and he told me of the works which his hands had made; and he said unto me: My son, my son (and his hand was stretched out), behold I will *show* you all these. And he put his hand upon mine *eyes*, and I *saw* those things which his hands had made, which were many; and they *multiplied before mine eyes*, and I could not *see* the end thereof” (Abr. 3:11–12, emphasis added).²

“And the Lord said unto me: Abraham, I *show* these things unto thee before ye go into Egypt, that ye may declare all these words” (Abr. 3:15, emphasis added).

“If two things exist, and there be one above the other, there shall be greater things above them; therefore Kolob is the greatest of all the Kokaubeam that thou hast *seen*, because it is nearest unto me” (Abr. 3:16, emphasis added).

“I rule in the heavens above, and in the earth beneath, in all wisdom and prudence, over all the intelligences *thine eyes have seen* from the beginning; I came down in the beginning in the midst of all the intelligences thou hast *seen*. Now the Lord had *shown* unto me, Abraham, the intelligences that were organized before the world was; and among all these there were many of the noble and great ones; and God *saw* these souls that they were good, and he stood in the midst of them, and he said: These I will make my rulers; for he stood among those that were spirits, and he *saw* that they were good; and he said unto me: Abraham,

2. Intriguingly, in 1893, Charles Lowell Walker preserved the testimony of a certain John Alger, who related that Joseph Smith informed him (Alger) in 1835 that during the First Vision God the Father physically touched Joseph’s eyes, whereupon the Prophet beheld Jesus Christ. A. Karl Larson and Katharine Miles Larson, eds., *Diary of Charles Lowell Walker*, 2 vols. (Logan: Utah State University Press, 1980), 2:755–56. Although the reliability of this account is diminished by it being a late, thirdhand reminiscence, the parallel with the Lord touching Abraham’s eyes at Abraham 3:12 is somewhat remarkable.

thou art one of them; thou wast chosen before thou wast born” (Abr. 3:21–23, emphasis added).

“Now I, Abraham, *saw* that it was after the Lord’s time, which was after the time of Kolob; for as yet the Gods had not appointed unto Adam his reckoning” (Abr. 5:13, emphasis added).

This depiction of the patriarch as a seer is congruent with a similar motif in the book of Genesis. As summarized by Everett Fox, Genesis also utilizes the language of perception and vision (specifically the verb *ra’ah*, “to see”) in the Abrahamic narrative cycle.

At the outset of Abraham’s journey to Canaan, which signals his entry into biblical tradition as an independent personality, God sends him off to a land that he will “let him see” (12:1). Arriving in the land, Abraham is granted a communication from God, expressed by the phrase “YHWH was seen by Avram . . .” (12:7). God subsequently promises the land to him and his descendants (“see from the place that you are . . . for all the land that you see, to you I give it and to your seed, for the ages” [13:15]). “Seeing” comes to the fore in the story of Abraham’s concubine Hagar; her encounter with God’s messenger ends with her addressing a “God of Seeing” (16:13). Further meetings between Abraham and God (17:1, 18:1) likewise express themselves visually, with the latter scene, where God announces Isaac’s impending birth at Abraham’s tent, almost unique in the Bible for its bold picture of God appearing directly to human beings.³

The Jewish philosopher Martin Buber identified seven revelations to Abraham in the Genesis account that lead with the theme of the patriarch seeing or beholding God or otherwise perceiving some crucial information pertaining to God’s covenant:⁴

“Now the Lord had said unto Abram, Get thee out of thy country, and from thy kindred, and from thy father’s house, unto a land that I will *shew* thee” (Gen. 12:1, emphasis added).

“And the Lord *appeared* unto Abram, and said, Unto thy seed will I give this land: and there builded he an altar unto the Lord, who *appeared* unto him” (Gen. 12:7, emphasis added).

“And the Lord said unto Abram, after that Lot was separated from him, *Lift up now thine eyes*, and *look* from the place where thou art

3. Everet Fox, *The Five Books of Moses: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy*, The Schocken Bible 1 (New York: Schocken, 1995), xvii.

4. Martin Buber, “Abraham the Seer (Genesis 12–25),” in *On the Bible: Eighteen Studies*, ed. Nahum N. Glatzer (Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 2000), 22–43, esp. 37–41. Buber’s scripture references contain some errors; they are corrected here.

northward, and southward, and eastward, and westward” (Gen. 13:14, emphasis added).

“After these things the word of the Lord came unto Abram in a *vision*, saying, Fear not, Abram: I am thy shield, and thy exceeding great reward.” (Gen. 15:1, emphasis added).

“And when Abram was ninety years old and nine, the Lord *appeared* to Abram, and said unto him, I am the Almighty God; walk before me, and be thou perfect” (Gen. 17:1, emphasis added).

“And the Lord *appeared* unto him in the plains of Mamre: and he sat in the tent door in the heat of the day” (Gen. 18:1, emphasis added).

“And it came to pass after these things, that God did tempt Abraham, and said unto him, Abraham: and he said, Behold, here I am. And he said, Take now thy son, thine only son Isaac, whom thou lovest, and get thee into the land of Moriah; and offer him there for a burnt offering upon one of the mountains which I will tell thee of. . . . Then on the third day Abraham *lifted up his eyes*, and *saw* the place afar off” (Gen. 22:1–2, 4, emphasis added).

As Buber elaborates, the first six revelations culminate with the seventh—the binding of Isaac in the land of Moriah (Gen. 22:2),⁵ which Abraham renames Jehovah-jireh (Gen. 22:14; “Jehovah will see”; *yhw-h-yirē’eh*). This new name is given to the site after the angel of the Lord calls out Abraham’s name (Gen. 22:11; compare Abr. 1:15–16) and after the latter lifts up his eyes to see the ram caught in a thicket, which acts as a substitute sacrifice (Gen. 22:13).

In the saving moment [Abraham] lifts up his eyes and sees the ram. And now he proclaims over the altar the name that makes known the imperishable essence of this place, Mount Moriah: YHVH Will See. . . . God sees man, and man sees God. God sees Abraham, and tests him by seeing him as the righteous and “whole” man who walks before his God, and now, at the end of his road, he conquers even this final place, the holy temple mountain [compare 2 Chr. 3:1], by acting on God’s behalf. Abraham sees God with the eye of his action and so recognizes Him. . . . The mutual relationship of the one making the demands, who makes them only in order to bless, and of the one making the sacrifice and receiving the highest blessing in the moment of the greatest readiness

5. The name Moriah might derive from *mr’h* (“sight, vision”) or might otherwise be related to the verb *ra’ah*. If so, this would make the name of the location, appropriately, the “land of vision.” E. A. Speiser, *Genesis*, The Anchor Yale Bible (New York: Doubleday, 1964), 163; and R. W. L. Moberly, *The Bible, Theology, and Faith: A Study of Abraham and Jesus* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 111–12.

to sacrifice, here appears as the reciprocity of seeing. God sees the innermost reality of the human soul; and man sees the way of God, so that he may walk in His footsteps. The man sees, and sees also that he is being seen.⁶

It is for this reason that Buber feels it appropriate to afford Abraham the title of seer. “Abraham sees God with the eye of his action and so recognizes Him. . . . Abraham *becomes* a prophet, but a seer is what he was from the very first moment when God ‘let Himself be seen.’”⁷ The running theme of Abraham as a seer adds a level of depth and narrative sophistication to both the Genesis account and the account of Abraham’s stargazing in the Book of Abraham.

Further Reading

Bowen, Matthew L. “‘In the Mount of the Lord It Shall Be Seen’ and ‘Provided’: Theophany and Sacrifice as the Etiological Foundation of the Temple in Israelite and Latter-day Saint Tradition.” *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 5 (2013): 201–23.

6. Buber, “Abraham the Seer (Genesis 12–25),” 42. See also the insightful commentary on this theme from a Latter-day Saint perspective offered in Matthew L. Bowen, “‘In the Mount of the Lord It Shall Be Seen’ and ‘Provided’: Theophany and Sacrifice as the Etiological Foundation of the Temple in Israelite and Latter-day Saint Tradition,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 5 (2013): 201–23, esp. 210–17.

7. Buber, “Abraham the Seer (Genesis 12–25),” 42–43, emphasis in original.

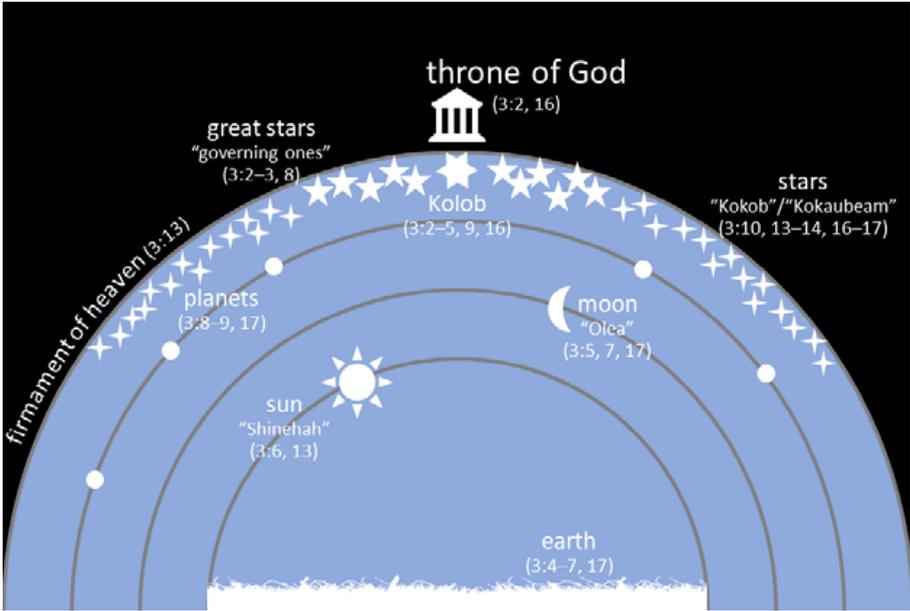


FIGURE 23. The cosmos depicted in the Book of Abraham when read as a geocentric text. Courtesy Michael B. Parker.

Abrahamic Astronomy

The Book of Abraham is noteworthy for its description of what is sometimes called “Abrahamic astronomy.”¹ Chapter 3 of the Book of Abraham, along with Facsimile 2, contains this astronomical portrait, which is not always easy to understand. Scholars looking at the text in chapter 3 have articulated at least three different models for interpreting this feature.

The first model seeks to understand the astronomy in the Book of Abraham through a scientific lens. Those who accept this paradigm have offered arguments for how Abrahamic astronomy can be harmonized with modern science.² The second model works under the assumption that the astronomical concepts presented in the Book of Abraham are rooted in ancient cosmology. In particular, this model sees the Book of

1. For instance, Erich Robert Paul, *Science, Religion, and Mormon Cosmology* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1992), 87, 100, 102–3, 121; Daniel C. Peterson, “News from Antiquity,” *Ensign* 24, no. 1 (January 1994): 19; and Richard Lyman Bushman with Jed Woodworth, *Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2005), 454.

2. Historically, this has proven to be the most popular model. See, for example, Andrew Jenson, “Joseph Smith a True Prophet, III: Astronomy of Abraham,” *Latter-day Saints’ Millennial Star* 53, no. 16 (April 20, 1891): 241–44; and J. E. Hickman, “Astronomy Attests the Truth of the Book of Abraham,” *Improvement Era* 19, no. 7 (May 1916): 591–96. For recent iterations of this model, see Michael D. Rhodes and J. Ward Moody, “Astronomy and Creation in the Book of Abraham,” in *Astronomy, Papyrus, and Covenant*, ed. John Gee and Brian M. Hauglid (Provo, Utah: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 2005), 17–36; and Michael D. Rhodes, “The Scriptural Accounts of the Creation: A Scientific Perspective,” in *Converging Paths to Truth*, ed. Michael D. Rhodes and J. Ward Moody (Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2011), 123–49; compare J. Ward Moody, “Times of Reckoning and Set Times in Abraham 3,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 38 (2020): 1–14.

Abraham as depicting a geocentric (earth-centered) view of the cosmos, which differs from our modern scientific understanding that the sun is at the center of our solar system.³ The third model argues for essentially an inverse of the second model and puts forth a reading of the Book of Abraham's astronomy that places Kolob, not the earth, at the center of the cosmos. This model argues that while the astronomy of the Book of Abraham may be ancient, the main focus should be on the spiritual truths that can be gleaned from the text.⁴

Each of these models has its respective strengths and weaknesses. For the purposes of this treatment (placing the Book of Abraham in the ancient world), the second model that sees the Book of Abraham's astronomy as an ancient geocentric cosmos is worth paying close attention to. According to this model,

the astronomy in the Book of Abraham uses as its point of reference "the earth upon which thou standest" (Abraham 3:3, 5-7). It mentions various heavenly bodies, such as "the stars" (Abraham 3:2), among which is Kolob (Abraham 3:3-4). These provide a fixed backdrop for the heavens. Among the stars are various bodies that move in relation to the fixed backdrop, each of which is called a "planet" (Abraham 3:5, 8) or a "light" (Abraham 3:5-7), though since the sun and moon and certain stars are each also called a "planet," we should not think of them as necessarily being what we call planets. Each of these planets is associated with "its times and seasons in the revolutions thereof" (Abraham 3:4). These lights revolve around something, and that is the fixed reference point, "the earth upon which thou standest" (Abraham 3:3, 5-7). The Book of Abraham thus presents a geocentric astronomy, like almost all ancient astronomies, including ancient Egyptian astronomy.⁵

Importantly, the Lord explicitly told Abraham: "I show these things [the heavenly bodies described in Abraham 3] unto thee before ye go into Egypt, that ye may declare all these words" (Abr. 3:15). Evidently the astronomy revealed to Abraham was meant, in part, to take conceptions of the cosmos familiar to the ancient Egyptians and replace them with a proper gospel understanding. "Abraham was to teach not

3. John Gee, William J. Hamblin, and Daniel C. Peterson, "'And I Saw the Stars': The Book of Abraham and Ancient Geocentric Astronomy," in *Astronomy, Papyrus, and Covenant*, 1-16; compare William E. Dibble, "The Book of Abraham and Pythagorean Astronomy," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 8, nos. 3-4 (Fall 1973): 134-38.

4. Kerry Muhlestein, "Encircling Astronomy and the Egyptians: An Approach to Abraham 3," *Religious Educator* 10, no. 1 (2009): 33-50.

5. Gee, *Introduction to the Book of Abraham*, 115-16.

only astronomy but also gospel principles the Lord explained through astronomic means.”⁶ This could explain why the Book of Abraham contains an apparently prescientific description of the cosmos rooted in the ancient world. This could only be feasibly accomplished if Abraham communicated to the Egyptians and likened the cosmos to gospel truths in ways they understood.

While the Book of Abraham’s astronomy symbolically teaches important truths about the plan of salvation,⁷ and while it is interesting to explore how modern science might inform our understanding, the cosmology in the text can also be grounded in the ancient world.

Further Reading

- Gee, John. “Abrahamic Astronomy.” In *An Introduction to the Book of Abraham*, 115–20. Salt Lake City: Deseret Book; Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 2017.
- Gee, John, William J. Hamblin, and Daniel C. Peterson. “‘And I Saw the Stars’: The Book of Abraham and Ancient Geocentric Astronomy.” In *Astronomy, Papyrus, and Covenant*, edited by John Gee and Brian M. Hauglid, 1–16. Provo, Utah: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 2005.
- Muhlestein, Kerry. “Astronomy.” In *Pearl of Great Price Reference Companion*, edited by Dennis L. Largey, 37–38. Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2017.
- . “Encircling Astronomy and the Egyptians: An Approach to Abraham 3.” *Religious Educator* 10, no. 1 (2009): 33–50.
- Rhodes, Michael D., and J. Ward Moody. “Astronomy and Creation in the Book of Abraham.” In *Astronomy, Papyrus, and Covenant*, edited by John Gee and Brian M. Hauglid, 17–36. Provo, Utah: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 2005.

6. Muhlestein, “Encircling Astronomy and the Egyptians,” 35.

7. Muhlestein, “Encircling Astronomy and the Egyptians,” 43–48.

Shinehah, the Sun

One of the astronomical terms defined in the Book of Abraham is Shinehah, which is said to be the sun (Abr. 3:13). Earlier in the Book of Abraham, the “god of Shagreel” is identified as the sun as well (Abr. 1:9). The context of these passages suggests that Shagreel is a West Semitic name or word while Shinehah is an Egyptian name or word, although this is not explicit in the text.¹ We do not know how Joseph Smith intended the word Shinehah to be pronounced; whether, for instance, *shine-hah* or *shi-ney-hah* or some other way.² However it is pronounced, contrary to the claim made by some of Joseph Smith’s critics,³ there is evidence that Shinehah is an authentic ancient Egyptian word.

1. The identity of this god is not certain, but there are a number of possibilities. See the explorations 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, 2009), 416–17; Hugh Nibley and Michael D. Rhodes, *One Eternal Round*, The 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), 173–75; Robert F. Smith, “A Brief Assessment of the LDS Book of Abraham,” unpublished manuscript in authors’ possession, 12; and Richard D. Draper, S. Kent Brown, and Michael D. Rhodes, *The Pearl of Great Price: A Verse-by-Verse Commentary* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2005), 251. But see also Matthew Grey, “Approaching Egyptian Papyri through Biblical Language: Joseph Smith’s Use of Hebrew in His Translation of the Book of Abraham,” in *Producing Ancient Scripture: Joseph Smith’s Translation Projects in the Development of Mormon Christianity*, ed. Michael Hubbard MacKay, Mark Ashurst-McGee, and Brian M. Hauglid (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2020), 429, who believes Shinehah and its companion word Olea (defined as “the moon” at Abr. 3:13) derive from Joseph Smith’s work attempting to recover the “pure language” of Adam.

2. The current official edition of the Pearl of Great Price published by The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints does not provide a standardized pronunciation for Shinehah or the other astronomical terms in the Book of Abraham.

3. Samuel A. B. Mercer, “Joseph Smith as an Interpreter and Translator of Egyptian,” *Utah Survey* 1, no. 1 (September 1913): 33–34.

Beginning around 2350 BC, “the walls of the inner chambers and corridors of ancient Egyptian pyramids were inscribed with a series of ritual and magical spells” known today as the Pyramid Texts. “These inscriptions constitute the oldest body of Egyptian religious writings” and were later copied “on tombs, sarcophagi, coffins, canopic chests, papyri, stelae, and other funerary monuments of nonroyal Egyptians.”⁴ Discovered in 1880 and translated into English for the first time in 1952,⁵ the Pyramid Texts were intended to outline the “deceased’s relationship to two gods, Osiris and the Sun,” and guide him or her through the afterlife as a glorified spirit.⁶

Among other things, the Pyramid Texts provided astronomical or cosmological information meant to help guide the deceased on this afterlife journey.⁷ “Since it was predicated on the Sun’s daily cycle of death and rebirth, the deceased’s own afterlife was envisioned as a journey in company with the Sun.”⁸ The path of the sun through the sky from east to west, known as the ecliptic, was envisioned in the Pyramid Texts as a celestial canal or waterway that bisected the sky into northern and southern hemispheres.⁹ Indeed, this canal or waterway was probably seen as “the celestial counterpart of the Nile.”¹⁰ Inscriptions from the Pyramid Texts overtly speak of the sun (or the solar barque) traveling along this celestial waterway.¹¹

There are two names given for this celestial canal or waterway (the sun’s ecliptic) in the Pyramid Texts. The more common spelling is *mr-n-h3* and is translated by Egyptologist James Allen as “Winding Canal.”¹² A less common but still attested second name for this same “Winding Canal” in the Pyramid Texts is spelled in a way that by Abraham’s time

4. James P. Allen, trans., *The Ancient Egyptian Pyramid Texts*, ed. Peter Der Manuelian (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2005), 1.

5. Allen, *Ancient Egyptian Pyramid Texts*, 2.

6. Allen, *Ancient Egyptian Pyramid Texts*, 7–8.

7. Rolf Krauss, *Astronomische Konzepte und Jenseitsvorstellungen in den Pyramidentexten* (Wiesbaden, Ger.: Harrassowitz Verlag, 1997).

8. Allen, *Ancient Egyptian Pyramid Texts*, 8–9.

9. Krauss, *Astronomische Konzepte und Jenseitsvorstellungen*, 14–66; Allen, *Ancient Egyptian Pyramid Texts*, 9; John Gee, “Hypocephali as Astronomical Documents,” in *Aegyptus et Pannonia V: Acta Symposii anno 2008*, ed. Hedvig Györy and Ádám Szabó (Budapest: Ancient Egyptian Committee of the Hungarian-Egyptian Friendship Society, 2016), 60.

10. Robert G. Bauval, “A Master-Plan for the Three Pyramids of Giza Based on the Configuration of the Three Stars of the Belt of Orion,” *Discussions in Egyptology* 13 (1989): 10.

11. Pyramid Text (PT) 334 (§543a–b); PT 548 (§§1345c; 1346a–c).

12. Allen, *Ancient Egyptian Pyramid Texts*, esp. 444. PT 263 (§340d); PT 264 (§343a); PT 265 (§352a); PT 266 (§359b); PT 304 (§469a); PT 334 (§543b); PT 359 (§§ 594b–f; 596b; 599a–d; 600a–b); PT 504 (§1084b); PT 507 (§1102d); PT 522 (§1228b–c).

may have been pronounced similar to *shi-ne-hah* (\check{s} -*n-h3* or \check{s} *nh3*).¹³ Although they alternate in the Pyramid Texts, the different spellings of the name would have likely been seen as being synonymous,¹⁴ and so Egyptologists today typically standardize the spelling to read all attestations of the name the more common way (*mr-n-h3*).¹⁵ Despite this, the name survived into Abraham's day in texts known today as the Coffin Texts (which were, in part, something of a direct descendant of the Pyramid Texts) predominantly as \check{s} -*n-h3* (or \check{s} *nh3*).¹⁶

13. PT 437 (§802a), PT 512 (§1162c), PT 555 (§§1376c; 1377c), PT 569 (§1441a), PT 624 (§1759b), PT 697 (§2172c), PT 767 (§20). There is some question about the original pronunciation of the first consonant in the name \check{s} -*n-h3*. The hieroglyph used to represent the sound *sh* (\check{s}) (compare Rainer Hannig, *Ägyptisches Wörterbuch I: Altes Reich und Erste Zwischenzeit* [Mainz, Ger.: Verlag Philipp von Zabern, 2003], 1278–79) was also used in Old Egyptian (the form of the Egyptian language the Pyramid Texts were written in) to represent the sound *x* (*h*). Questions remain as to whether the glyph was originally pronounced *sh* (\check{s}) or *x* (*h*). See the discussion in Antonio Loprieno, *Ancient Egyptian: A Linguistic Introduction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 34; James P. Allen, *The Ancient Egyptian Language: An Historical Study* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 44–45; James P. Allen, *A Grammar of the Ancient Egyptian Pyramid Texts, Volume 1: Unis* (Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 2017), 25–26; and James P. Allen, *Ancient Egyptian Phonology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 68–69. By Abraham's day, the glyph was being pronounced uniformly as *sh* (\check{s}), so while the original pronunciation of this spelling of the name remains debated, the way the word is rendered in the Book of Abraham with *sh* is entirely justifiable. Unfortunately, because the vocalization of ancient Egyptian is still largely educated guesswork, especially when it comes to the vowels, at this point we can only give approximations about how \check{s} -*n-h3* would have been pronounced in Abraham's day. What matters most for Shinehah in the Book of Abraham is that the consonants match \check{s} -*n-h3*/ \check{s} *nh3* rather nicely. On Middle Egyptian vocalization, see James P. Allen, *Middle Egyptian: An Introduction to the Language and Culture of Hieroglyphs*, 3rd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 18–21; and Allen, *Ancient Egyptian Phonology*.

14. This might explain the odd spelling *mr-{\check{s}}-n-h3* in PT 510 (§1138d).

15. Krauss, *Astronomische Konzepte und Jenseitsvorstellungen*, 15; James P. Allen, *A New Concordance of the Pyramid Texts, Vol. 1: Introduction, Occurrences, Transcription* (Providence, R.I.: Brown University Press, 2013); see also *mr nh3i* in Allen, *Ancient Egyptian Pyramid Texts*, 444.

16. Rendered “Winding Waterway” by Raymond O. Faulkner, *The Ancient Egyptian Coffin Texts*, 3 vols. (Warminster: Aris and Phillips, 1973–1978). Coffin Text (CT) 18 (I 53); CT 61 (I 259); CT 62 (I 270); CT 163 (II 405); CT 214 (III 174); CT 241 (III 326); CT 268 (IV 1); CT 285 (IV 35); CT 347 (IV 380); CT 393 (V 67); CT 418 (V 253); CT 473 (VI 15); CT 474 (VI 26); CT 479 (VI 42); CT 582 (VI 199); CT 905 (VII 111); CT 987 (VII 194); CT 1129 (VII 458). Attested as *mr-n-h3* in CT 305 (IV 59). Compare Rami van der Molen, *A Hieroglyphic Dictionary of Egyptian Coffin Texts* (Leiden, Neth.: Brill, 2000), 599, who transliterates the glyphs as \check{s} *nh3* and renders the name as “Waterway of the Winding.” The first attempt to compile and publish the Coffin Texts was undertaken by the French scholar Pierre Lacau beginning in 1904. Adriaan de Buck published the first complete

From this evidence it is clear that both *š-n-ḥz* and *mr-n-ḥz* are attested as names for the sun's ecliptic. The latter is more common in the Old Kingdom (ca. 2686–2181 BC) but the former is more common in the Middle Kingdom (ca. 2040–1782 BC) and thus in Abraham's day.¹⁷ The spelling of the name as attested in the Coffin Texts from Abraham's day matches the spelling of Shinehah in the Book of Abraham fairly closely. What's more, the context in the Book of Abraham is significant since Shinehah (the sun) is oriented in a tiered cosmos of graded celestial bodies (the moon, stars, and so forth) rotating around the earth at faster or slower revolutions depending on their relative distance to the earth (Abr. 3:4–9, 16–17).¹⁸

So while the Egyptian word for the sun itself is not the same as in the Book of Abraham,¹⁹ one of the Egyptian words for the sun's ecliptic (the path of the sun through the sky) as attested in Abraham's day is.²⁰

Further Reading

Gee, John. "Abrahamic Astronomy." In *An Introduction to the Book of Abraham*, 115–20. Salt Lake City: Deseret Book; Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 2017.

Nibley, Hugh, and Michael D. Rhodes. *One Eternal Round*, 333–35. The 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.

collection of these texts between 1935 and 1961. The first accessible English translation of the complete (or near-complete) corpus of Coffin Texts were the volumes published by Raymond Faulkner as cited above.

17. See further John Gee, "Fantasy and Reality in the Translation of the Book of Abraham," *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 42 (2021): 156–58.

18. John Gee, William J. Hamblin, and Daniel C. Peterson, "And I Saw the Stars': The Book of Abraham and Ancient Geocentric Astronomy," in *Astronomy, Papyrus, and Covenant*, ed. John Gee and Brian M. Hauglid (Provo, Utah: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 2005), esp. 7–8, 12.

19. The word for the sun itself in ancient Egyptian is *rꜥ*, the same word for the name of the sun-god Re.

20. See further Nibley and Rhodes, *One Eternal Round*, 333–35, who propose an etymology for Shinehah deriving from the Egyptian words *šni* ("to encircle") and *nḥḥ* ("eternity," "many," "millions," and so forth) and thus reconstruct the word as **šn+ḥḥ* (effectively, "one eternal round"). While this might be plausible etymologically, the main drawback to this proposed origin for the word Shinehah is that it is hypothetical and reconstructed, whereas *š-n-ḥz/š nḥz* is attested. Nibley and Rhodes also rightly pick up on the cosmological significance of the sun's "motion relative to that of other heavenly bodies" in Abraham 3:13.

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).

1. The Book of Abraham tends to conflate “star” with “planet,” leading some Latter-day Saints to speak of Kolob as a planet or world. Compare, for instance, William Appleby, Journal, 5 May 1841, MS 1401, Church History Library; Brigham Young, “Territory of Utah: Proclamation, for a Day of Praise and Thanksgiving,” in *Journals of the House of Representatives, Council, and Joint Sessions of the First Annual and Special Sessions of the Legislative Assembly of the Territory of Utah* (Salt Lake City: Brigham Young, 1852), 166; John Taylor, “Origins, Object, and Destiny of Woman,” *Mormon* 3, no. 28 (August 29, 1857): [2]; Orson Pratt, “Millennium,” *Latter-day Saints’ Millennial Star* 28, no. 36 (September 8, 1866): 561; Ann Fellows, “Religion and Science,” *Woman’s Exponent* 12, no. 7 (September 1, 1883): 49; Orson F. Whitney, “Sunday Services,” *Deseret Evening News*, August 20, 1888, [2]; Andrew Jenson, Discourse, January 16, 1891, in “Joseph Smith a True Prophet,” *Deseret Evening News*, March 4, 1891, [5], repr. “Joseph Smith a True Prophet,” *Latter-day Saints’ Millennial Star* 53, no. 16 (April 20, 1891): 241; George Q. Cannon, “Discourse,” *Deseret Evening News*, May 4, 1895, 9; B. H. Roberts, *A New Witness for God* (Salt Lake City: George Q. Cannon and Sons, 1895), 447; Bruce R. McConkie, *Mormon Doctrine* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1958), 390; J. Reuben Clark Jr., *Behold the Lamb of God* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1962), 30; Spencer W. Kimball, in *One Hundred Thirty-second Annual Conference of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1962), 60–61; Joseph Fielding Smith, in *One Hundred Thirty-sixth Semi-annual General Conference of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1966), 83; and Bruce L. Christensen, “Media Myths and Miracles,” *BYU Devotional*, Provo, Utah, November 8, 1994, <https://speeches.byu.edu/talks/bruce-l-christensen/media-myths-miracles/>. While confusing for modern readers, this conflation makes sense from an ancient perspective, because astronomical texts from the ancient Near East did not neatly distinguish the two categories as is done in

- 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 “signify[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.² 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.³

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

modern scientific cosmology. “The nouns [in ancient Mesopotamian languages] commonly translated as ‘star’ in English . . . refer to a full range of observed astronomical phenomena, including the fixed stars but also constellations, planets, mirages, comets, shooting stars, etc.” Wayne Horowitz, “Mesopotamian Star Lists,” in *Handbook of Archaeoastronomy and Ethnoastronomy*, ed. Clive L. N. Ruggles (New York: Springer, 2015), 1830; compare John Gee, William J. Hamblin, and Daniel C. Peterson, “And I Saw the Stars’: The Book of Abraham and Ancient Geocentric Astronomy,” in *Astronomy, Papyrus, and Covenant*, ed. John Gee and Brian M. Hauglid (Provo, Utah: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 2005), 11.

2. Roberts, *New Witness for God*, 446–48; George Reynolds and Janne M. Sjodahl, *Commentary on the Pearl of Great Price* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News Press, 1965), 308–12; Andrew Skinner, “The Book of Abraham: A Most Remarkable Book,” *Ensign* 27, no. 3 (March 1997): 20–21; Joseph Fielding McConkie and Craig J. Ostler, *Revelations of the Restoration: A Commentary on the Doctrine and Covenants and Other Modern Revelations* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2000), 1000–1001; *The Pearl of Great Price Student Manual* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2017), 71–73, 78, 81.

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. McF., “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*,⁴ meaning “heart, center, middle,” and so forth, and is thus related to the Semitic root *qrb*, meaning “to be near, close.”⁵ 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

4. Janne M. Sjodahl, “The Book of Abraham,” *Improvement Era* 16, no. 4 (February 1913): 329; Janne M. Sjodahl, “The Word ‘Kolob,’” *Improvement Era* 16, no. 6 (April 1913): 621; Sidney B. Sperry, *Ancient Records Testify in Papyrus and Stone* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1938), 86; Robert F. Smith, “Some ‘Neologisms’ from the Mormon Canon,” in *Conference on the Language of the Mormons* (Provo, Utah: Language Research Center, Brigham Young University, 1973), 64; Michael D. Rhodes, “The Joseph Smith Hypocephalus . . . Twenty Years Later,” 8, unpublished manuscript, [1997], accessed December 20, 2022, <https://www.magicgatebg.com/Books/Joseph%20Smith%20Hypocephalus.pdf>; Michael D. Rhodes, “Teaching the Book of Abraham Facsimiles,” *Religious Educator* 4, no. 2 (2003): 121; Richard D. Draper, S. Kent Brown, and Michael D. Rhodes, *The Pearl of Great Price: A Verse-by-Verse Commentary* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2005), 289–90; Hugh Nibley and Michael D. Rhodes, *One Eternal Round, The 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), 250–51.

5. *The Assyrian Dictionary of the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago*, ed. John A. Brinkman and others (Chicago: Oriental Institute, 1982), s.v. *qerbu*; Jeremy Black, Andrew George, Nicholas Postgate, eds., *A Concise Dictionary of Akkadian* (Wiesbaden, Ger.: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2000), 288.

time.⁶ However, some scholars believe that the Semitic *qrb* (and Arabic *qalb*) are ultimately derived from the reconstructed Afroasiatic root **k̄lb/k̄rb*,⁷ which has attested cognate descendants in Egyptian (*k̄zb*; “interior, midst”), Akkadian (*qerbum*; “inside”), and Hebrew (*qereb*; “inside, middle”).⁸ The Egyptian example (*k̄zb*)⁹ is especially interesting, because there is evidence that the Egyptian aleph /s/ in Abraham’s day was used to render the liquid consonants /r/ and /l/ in Semitic languages.¹⁰ 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.”¹¹ 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 1913.¹² This, in turn, has prompted some to identify

6. The closest attested word in Abraham’s day to the Arabic *qalb* would probably be the Old Akkadian *qabla* or *qablu* (*qablitu*), meaning “in the middle” or “middle part.” *Assyrian Dictionary of the Oriental Institute*, s.v. *qabla*, *qablitu*; Black, George, and Postgate, *Concise Dictionary of Akkadian*, 281.

7. Antonio Loprieno, *Ancient Egyptian: A Linguistic Introduction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 32.

8. James P. Allen, *The Ancient Egyptian Language: A Historical Study* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 35; James P. Allen, *Ancient Egyptian Phonology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 62, 79.

9. Adolf Erman and Hermann Grapow, *Wörterbuch der Aegyptischen Sprache*, 6 vols. (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1958), 5:10–11; Rainer Hannig, *Großes Handwörterbuch Ägyptisch-Deutsch* (Mainz, Ger.: Philipp von Zabern Verlag, 1995), 849.

10. Aaron Ember, *Egypto-Semitic-Studies* (Leipzig, Ger.: Asia Major Verlag, 1930), 9–23; Allen, *Ancient Egyptian Phonology*, 53, 64, 67–68, 79–82; Allen, *Ancient Egyptian Language*, 35; compare Loprieno, *Ancient Egyptian*, 31, 38; Lanny Bell, “Interpreters and Egyptianized Nubians in Ancient Egyptian Foreign Policy: Aspects of the History of Egypt and Nubia” (PhD diss., University of Pennsylvania, 1976), 13–14; Vladimir Orel, “From Hamito-Semitic to Ancient Egyptian: Historical Phonology,” *Folia Linguistica Historica* 16, nos. 1–2 (1995): 147–48; Gábor Takács, “Semitic-Egyptian Relations,” in *The Semitic Languages: An International Handbook*, ed. Stefan Weninger (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2011), 8. For an attested example of the Egyptian aleph being used to render the Semitic /l/ during Abraham’s day (in a proper name, no less), see James P. Allen, “The Historical Inscription of Khnumhotep at Dahshur: Preliminary Report,” *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research* 352 (November 2008): 29–39; and James P. Allen, “L’inscription historique de Khnoumhotep à Dahchour,” *Bulletin de la Société Française d’Égyptologie* 173 (2009): 13–31.

11. *Assyrian Dictionary of the Oriental Institute*, s.v. *kalbu*; Black, George, and Postgate, *Concise Dictionary of Akkadian*, 142.

12. Robert C. Webb [James E. Homans], “A Critical Examination of the Fac-similies in the Book of Abraham,” *Improvement Era* 16, no. 5 (March 1913): 445; compare Robert C. Webb, *Joseph Smith as a Translator* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News Press, 1936), 102–3.

Kolob with Sirius, the dog-star.¹³ This theory actually goes back as far as the mid-nineteenth century, when William W. Phelps captured the idea in an 1857 poem.¹⁴ 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.”¹⁵ Both Sirius and Kolob share a number of overlapping characteristics, including the following:

- Both are associated with the throne of God.¹⁶
- Both are recognized as the “greatest” (probably meaning brightest) of stars in earth’s night sky.¹⁷

13. Webb, “Critical Examination of the Fac-similies,” 445; Webb, *Joseph Smith as a Translator*, 103; Nibley and Rhodes, *One Eternal Round*, 251–52.

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.’”

15. Joachim Frederich Quack, “Astronomy in Ancient Egypt,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Science and Medicine in the Classical World*, ed. Paul T. Keyser and John Scarborough (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 62. See also Raymond O. Faulkner, “The King and the Star-Religion in the Pyramid Texts,” *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 25, no. 3 (July 1966): 157–61; Richard H. Wilkinson, *The Complete Gods and Goddesses of Ancient Egypt* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 2003), 167–68; and Jay B. Holberg, *Sirius: Brightest Diamond in the Night Sky* (Berlin: Springer, 2007), 3–14.

16. One of the ancient Egyptian epithets for Sopdet/Sirius was *w^cbt swt* or “pure of thrones” in Pyramid Text 442 (S822a) and Pyramid Text 504 (S1082d). 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 rnpt spdt hnwt h3b3-s*), and "Sothis in the sky, the Female Ruler of the stars" (*spdt m pt hk3t n[t] h3b3-s*). 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 n3 ir km-n*), making the star the supreme creator, as it were. "She is Sirius and all things were created through her" (*spt t3y mtw-w ir mdt nb r-hr-s*). Wilhelm Spiegelberg, *Der Ägyptische Mythos vom Sonnenauge* (Strassburg, Ger.: Georg Olms Verlag, 1917), 28–29.

20. Erman and Grapow, *Wörterbuch der Aegyptischen Sprache*, 1:48.

21. Hermann Hunger and John Steele, *The Babylonian Astronomical Compendium MUL.APIN* (New York: Routledge, 2019), 35, 49, 55, 62, 69; Hayim Ben Yosef Tawil, *An Akkadian Lexical Companion for Biblical Hebrew: Etymological-Semantic and Idiomatic Equivalents with Supplement on Biblical Aramaic* (Brooklyn, N.Y.: Ktav Publishing House, 2009), 164.

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 Lugalanda 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, *kelb* 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”²³ and it is possible that this representation predates Abraham’s day, although this point is disputed among Egyptologists.²⁴ 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.”²⁵ 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.²⁶

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.

23. Wilkinson, *Complete Gods and Goddesses of Ancient Egypt*, 168; Marjorie Susan Venit, *Visualizing the Afterlife in the Tombs of Graeco-Roman Egypt* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 183–84, 186, 192–93; and Catlín E. Barrett, *Egyptianizing Figurines from Delos: A Study in Hellenistic Religion* (Leiden, Neth.: Brill, 2011), 187–89.

24. Barrett, *Egyptianizing Figurines from Delos*, 187; Laszlo Kakosy, “Sothis,” in *Lexikon der Agyptologie*, ed. Wolfgang Helck and Eberhard Otto (Wiesbaden, Ger.: Harrassowitz Verlag, 1984), 5:1115.

25. Horowitz, “Mesopotamian Star Lists,” 1830.

26. John Gee, *An Introduction to the Book of Abraham* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book; Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 2017), 116–17;

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

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- Gee, John, William J. Hamblin, and Daniel C. Peterson. "‘And I Saw the Stars’: The Book of Abraham and Ancient Geocentric Astronomy." In *Astronomy, Papyrus, and Covenant*, edited by John Gee and Brian M. Hauglid, 1–16. Provo, Utah: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 2005.
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compare Kerry Muhlestein, "Encircling Astronomy and the Egyptians: An Approach to Abraham 3," *Religious Educator* 10, no. 1 (2009): 37–43.

The Divine Council

One thing that differentiates the Book of Abraham's account of the Creation from the biblical account in Genesis is that the Book of Abraham mentions plural *Gods* as the agents carrying out the Creation. "And then the Lord said: Let us go down. And they went down at the beginning, and they, that is the Gods, organized and formed the heavens and the earth" (Abr. 4:1). These Gods are mentioned thirty-two times in Abraham 4 and sixteen times in Abraham 5. Significantly, these Gods are said to have taken "counsel" among themselves during the Creation (Abr. 4:26; 5:2–3, 5).

This language of the Gods taking counsel among themselves in Abraham 4–5 appears to be a natural continuation of the description of the premortal council in heaven described in Abraham 3:22–28.¹ One of "rulers" in the premortal council who was "like unto God" is depicted as saying, "We will go down, for there is space there, and we will take of these materials, and we will make an earth whereon these may dwell; and we will prove them herewith, to see if they will do all things whatsoever the Lord their God shall command them" (vv. 23–25). In this manner the council of Gods in Abraham 3 counseled with each other during the Creation in Abraham 4–5.

1. It should be noted that unlike the modern versification of the Book of Abraham provided by James E. Talmage starting in the 1902 edition of the Pearl of Great Price, the versification of the Book of Abraham provided in the *Times and Seasons* under Joseph Smith's supervision does not separate chapters 3 and 4 of the Book of Abraham, so the premortal council scene in Abraham 3 reads as one unbroken, continuous narrative into the Creation starting in Abraham 4. Indeed, what is today Abraham 3:27–4:2 was just one verse as published by Joseph Smith. "The Book of Abraham," *Times and Seasons* 3, no. 10 (March 15, 1842): 720.

After the lifetime of Joseph Smith, archaeologists working in Egypt, Syria-Palestine, and Mesopotamia uncovered scores of texts written on papyrus, stone, and clay tablets. As these texts were translated, scholars were surprised to discover creation myths that in many ways paralleled the biblical Creation account while differing in other significant ways.² One way in which these creation myths were different from the Creation account in Genesis was the clear, stark portrayal of what came to be widely called the divine or heavenly council. In many of these myths, a group or family of gods or divinities work together in fashioning the components of the cosmos.³ Other times, the gods engage in divine battle over control of the cosmos.⁴ Whatever the specific case, almost universally these myths described multiple deities serving different roles or functions in the process of Creation.

With this extrabiblical material in mind, and with the discovery of superior manuscripts such as the Dead Sea Scrolls that provided better readings of certain biblical passages,⁵ scholars returned to the Hebrew Bible and reevaluated passages that appeared to acknowledge the presence of a divine plurality. Over time, a consensus has been reached that the Bible does indeed portray a multiplicity of gods, even if there remains individual scholarly disagreement over some of the finer details.⁶

2. For an accessible reproduction and discussion of some of the more prominent texts in this genre, as well as a bibliography, see Christopher B. Hays, *Hidden Riches: A Sourcebook for the Comparative Study of the Hebrew Bible and the Ancient Near East* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2014), 41–73. See also John H. Walton, *Ancient Near Eastern Thought and the Old Testament: Introducing the Conceptual World of the Hebrew Bible* (Grand Rapids, Mich: Baker Academic, 2006), 179–99; and John H. Walton, *Genesis 1 as Ancient Cosmology* (Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 2011).

3. For instance, the ancient Egyptian nine gods of the Heliopolitan Ennead or the eight gods of the Hermopolitan Ogdoad as attested in Pyramid Texts 301, 446, 527, 600 and Coffin Texts 75–81, 107, 335, 714; or the family of the Canaanite god El and his consort Athirat from the Ugaritic texts. For Egyptian cosmogony, see generally Vincent Arieh Tobin, “Creation Myths,” in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Egyptology*, ed. Donald A. Redford, 3 vols. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 2:469–72; for Ugaritic cosmology, see generally Mark S. Smith, *The Origins of Biblical Monotheism: Israel’s Polytheistic Background and the Ugaritic Texts* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001).

4. For instance, the combat of the gods Marduk and Tiamat from Mesopotamia. On such, see “The Epic of Creation” in *Myths from Mesopotamia: Creation, the Flood, Gilgamesh, and Others*, rev ed., trans. Stephanie Dalley (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 228–77.

5. For instance, consider the reading of Deuteronomy 32:7–9, 43–44 in 4QDeut^a, col. XII + 4QDeut^b, col. II; frg. 5 ii. See Eugene Ulrich, ed., *The Biblical Qumran Scrolls: Transcriptions and Textual Variants* (Leiden, Neth.: Brill, 2010), 240, 242.

6. For a representative sampling of the extensive literature, see Gerald Cooke, “The Sons of (the) God(s),” *Zeitschrift für die Alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 35, no. 1 (1964): 22–47;

In contrast to typical Jewish and Christian belief in Joseph Smith's day, the Book of Abraham frankly depicts a plurality of Gods and even uses specific language ("took counsel among themselves," Abr. 4:26) that invokes the presence of what is now widely recognized by scholars as the unquestionably ancient concept of the divine council. This divine council as depicted in the Book of Abraham is composed of, at least,

- "intelligences" and "noble and great ones" (Abr. 3:22);
- "God" (v. 23);
- "one . . . that was like unto God" (v. 24), who was "like unto the Son of Man" (v. 27); and
- "another" who was "second" to the one who was "like unto God" (v. 27).

According to the Book of Abraham, then, God the Father did indeed work with a council, of which Jesus Christ and other "noble and great" premortal intelligences, "souls," or "spirits" (vv. 22–23) were members. The polytheistic divine councils of the ancient Near East might well be echoes of the conception of the divine council portrayed in the Book of Abraham, or vice versa. To be sure, while there are striking similarities between the Book of Abraham and other ancient texts that feature a divine council, there are also notable differences. What is important for the Book of Abraham is that the text broadly (and even in some instances, specifically) shares a similar ancient conception of a heavenly hierarchy or council of divine beings. Besides the examples already provided in print,⁷ take additionally the grave stela of Tjetji, an important

E. Theodore Mullen Jr., *The Divine Council in Canaanite and Early Hebrew Literature*, Harvard Semitic Monographs 24 (Chico, Calif.: Scholars Press, 1980); S. B. Parker, "Council," in *Dictionary of Deities and Demons in the Bible*, ed. Karel van der Toorn, Bob Becking, and Pieter W. van der Horst (Leiden, Neth.: Brill, 1999), 204–8; S. B. Parker, "Sons of (the) God(s)," in *Dictionary of Deities and Demons in the Bible*, 794–800; Smith, *Origins of Biblical Monotheism*; and Min Suc Kee, "The Heavenly Council and Its Type-scene," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 31, no. 3 (2007): 259–73. For Latter-day Saint responses to this scholarship, see Daniel C. Peterson, "'Ye Are Gods': Psalm 82 and John 10 as Witnesses to the Divine Nature of Humankind," in *The Disciple as Scholar: Essays on Scripture and the Ancient World in Honor of Richard Lloyd Anderson*, ed. Stephen D. Ricks, Donald W. Parry, and Andrew H. Hedges (Provo, Utah: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 2000), 471–594; and Stephen O. Smoot, "The Divine Council in the Hebrew Bible and the Book of Mormon," *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 27 (2017): 155–80.

7. David E. Bokovoy, "'Ye Really Are Gods': A Response to Michael Heiser concerning the LDS Use of Psalm 82 and the Gospel of John," *FARMS Review* 19, no. 1 (2007):

administrator under the early Eleventh Dynasty (ca. 2134–2060 BC) pharaoh Intef II. In his stela, Tjetji is depicted as traversing the “firmament” (*biꜣ*) and “heaven” (*ḥrt*) as he “ascends” (*ꜣr*) into the presence of “the great god” (*ntr ꜣ*) and is welcomed into the “divine council” (*dꜣdꜣt-ntr*). This divine council is said to be a tribunal of “great ones” (*wrw*, with “seated god” determinative) who extend their arms to Tjetji when he is brought on board the sacred barque of Osiris (*dit n.f ꜣwy m nšmt*), thus assuring his divinization in the afterlife.⁸

While it is true that Joseph Smith learned from his Hebrew studies that the word for God (Elohim) in the Old Testament is technically a masculine plural noun,⁹ it does not seem likely that he would have learned about the divine council from his Hebrew teacher, Joshua Seixas, since the two seemed to strongly disagree on the implications this fact held for the biblical view of God.¹⁰ In any case, with the exception of the Bible, the surviving ancient texts that overtly depict the divine council were unknown in the Prophet’s day.

267–313, esp. 272–79; Terryl Givens with Brian M. Hauglid, *The Pearl of Greatest Price: Mormonism’s Most Controversial Scripture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), 125–28. See further Joseph Fielding McConkie, “Premortal Existence, Foreordinations, and Heavenly Councils,” in *Apocryphal Writings and the Latter-day Saints*, ed. C. Wilfred Griggs (Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 1986), 173–98.

8. Aylward M. Blackman, “The Stele of Thethi, Brit. Mus. No. 614,” *Journal of Egyptian Archaeology* 17, nos. 1/2 (1931): 55–61, plate VIII, lines 17–18, vertical.

9. On Joseph Smith’s study of Hebrew, see Matthew J. Grey, “‘The Word of the Lord in the Original’: Joseph Smith’s Study of Hebrew in Kirtland,” in *Approaching Antiquity: Joseph Smith and the Ancient World*, ed. Lincoln H. Blumell, Matthew J. Grey, and Andrew H. Hedges (Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2015), 249–302.

10. “Discourse, 16 June 1844–A, as Reported by Thomas Bullock,” 2, Joseph Smith Papers, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/discourse-16-june-1844-a-as-reported-by-thomas-bullock/2>. It does not appear to have been within Seixas’s disposition to have encouraged a “polytheistic” theology in his student Joseph Smith, since the former was an Orthodox Jew who later “adopted the basic tenets of Unitarian [Christian] belief.” As such, “it is highly doubtful that [he] would have advanced a pantheistic or trinitarian interpretation of Gen. 1” that Joseph Smith favored. Shalom Goldman, “Joshua/James Seixas (1802–1874): Jewish Apostasy and Christian Hebraism in Early Nineteenth-Century America,” *Jewish History* 7, no. 1 (Spring 1993): 76, 82; compare Shalom Goldman, *God’s Sacred Tongue: Hebrew and the American Imagination* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 194. Compare also the observation by Louis C. Zucker, “Joseph Smith as a Student of Hebrew,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 3, no. 2 (Summer 1968): 52.

While the theological implications of the divine council remain to be fully explored and articulated,¹¹ what can be said with a fair degree of reasonableness is that the Book of Abraham's depiction of the divine council shares features present in other ancient Near Eastern texts, some of which date to Abraham's day. This reinforces belief that the Book of Abraham is authentically ancient.

Further Reading

- Bokovoy, David E. "Ye Really *Are* Gods': A Response to Michael Heiser Concerning the LDS Use of Psalm 82 and the Gospel of John." *FARMS Review* 19, no. 1 (2007): 267–313.
- McConkie, Joseph Fielding. "Premortal Existence, Foreordinations, and Heavenly Councils." In *Apocryphal Writings and the Latter-day Saints*, edited by C. Wilfred Griggs, 173–98. Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 1986.
- Smoot, Stephen O. "Council, Chaos, and Creation in the Book of Abraham." *Journal of the Book of Mormon and Other Restoration Scripture* 22, no. 2 (2013): 28–39.

11. The Prophet Joseph Smith delivered a discourse in circa May 1841 where, referencing otherwise unknown or unpublished material from the Book of Abraham, he taught: "[An] everlasting covenant was made between three personages before the organizations of the earth, and relates to their dispensation of things to men on the earth. These personages, according to Abraham's record, are called: God the first, the Creator; God the second, the Redeemer, and God the third, the witness or Testator." "Discourse, circa May 1841, as Reported by Unidentified Scribe," 1, spelling and punctuation standardized, Joseph Smith Papers, accessed February 9, 2023, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/discourse-circa-may-1841-as-reported-by-unidentified-scribe/1>. On another occasion, the Prophet taught, "I have always declared God to be a distinct personage, Jesus Christ a separate and distinct personage from God the Father, [and] the Holy Ghost a distinct personage and a Spirit. These three constitute three distinct personages and three Gods." "Discourse, 16 June 1844–A, as Reported by Thomas Bullock," 1, spelling and punctuation standardized, Joseph Smith Papers, accessed February 9, 2023, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/discourse-16-june-1844-a-as-reported-by-thomas-bullock/1>. The unity and separateness of the Godhead was obviously an important topic for the Prophet, and subsequent prophets have added to and clarified this subject with additional teachings.

The Foreordination of Abraham

One of the most important doctrinal teachings in the Book of Abraham is that of the premortal existence of humankind and the foreordination of many “noble and great ones” to be God’s “rulers” (Abr. 3:22–28). Abraham himself was singled out as one who was divinely preordained to a great mission. “Now the Lord had shown unto me, Abraham, the intelligences that were organized before the world was; and among all these there were many of the noble and great ones; and God saw these souls that they were good, and he stood in the midst of them, and he said: These I will make my rulers; for he stood among those that were spirits, and he saw that they were good; and he said unto me: Abraham, thou art one of them; thou wast chosen before thou wast born” (vv. 22–23).¹

1. The text of the Book of Abraham does not seem to specify how or in what capacity these “noble and great” souls in the premortal council were to be “rulers.” Some Latter-day Saints have interpreted this to be referring to those God chose and preordained to be spiritual and secular leaders on earth (for example, Seymour B. Young, in *Seventy-fourth Semi-annual Conference of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* [Salt Lake City: Deseret News, 1903], 60.) Others have understood these “rulers” to be humans on earth who exhibit exemplary attributes that make them outstanding among humanity (for example, Orson F. Whitney, “The Fall and the Redemption,” *Improvement Era* 24, no. 5 [March 1921]: 375). Others interpret the passage to be referring to the gods in the divine council (for example, Blake Ostler, *Exploring Mormon Thought: Of God and Gods* [Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2008], 26–29). Another doctrinal interpretation or application of these verses might be that these “rulers” are those who become “kings and priests unto God” through the process of exaltation (Rev. 1:6; 5:10). As Joseph Smith taught in his April 7, 1844, discourse known today as the King Follett Discourse, “You have got to learn how to be a god yourself in order to save you[r]self—to be priests & Kings as all Gods has done—by going from a small degree to another from exaltation to ex[altation]—till they are able to sit in glory as doth those who sit enthroned.” “Discourse, 7 April 1844, as Reported by William Clayton,” 14, Joseph Smith Papers, accessed

Since the Book of Abraham so clearly teaches the idea of a premortal existence and the divine foreordination of rulers, the question might reasonably be asked whether these teachings find a plausible context in the ancient Near East. In fact, scholars recognize that Near Eastern peoples believed in the divine foreordination of their kings (and in the case of the ancient Israelites, some of their prophets).² As one scholar put it, “Divine election—the academic designation for the choosing of people by deity for position and opportunity in mortal life—is a claim that is well attested in ancient Near Eastern texts, including the Hebrew Bible.”³

For example, perhaps the best-known biblical passage that speaks of the divine foreordination and election of a prophet appears in the opening chapter of the book of Jeremiah. “Before I formed thee in the belly I knew thee; and before thou camest forth out of the womb I sanctified thee, and I ordained thee a prophet unto the nations” (Jer. 1:5).⁴ Outside of the Bible, in a prologue to his famous collection of laws, the ancient Babylonian king Hammurabi (ca. 1810–1750 BC) depicted himself as being foreordained by the gods to rule:

When the august God Anu . . . and the god Enlil, lord of heaven and earth, who determines the destinies of the land, allotted supreme power over all the peoples to the god Marduk[,] . . . [a]t that time, the gods Anu and Enlil, for the enhancement of the well-being of the people, named me by my name: Hammurabi, the pious prince, who venerates the gods, to make justice prevail in the land, to abolish the wicked and the evil, to prevent the strong from oppressing the weak, to rise like the sun-god Shamash over all mankind, to illuminate the land.⁵

The ancient Egyptians of Abraham’s day likewise believed their kings were divinely pre-elected to be rulers. One Egyptian text from

February 9, 2023, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/discourse-7-april-1844-as-reported-by-william-clayton/4>. Compare “Conference Minutes,” *Times and Seasons* 5, no. 15 (August 15, 1844): 614.

2. Dana M. Pike, “Before Jeremiah Was: Divine Election in the Ancient Near East,” in *A Witness for the Restoration: Essays in Honor of Robert J. Matthews*, ed. Kent P. Jackson and Andrew C. Skinner (Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 2007), 33–59; Dana M. Pike, “Formed in and Called from the Womb,” in *To Seek the Law of the Lord: Essays in Honor of John W. Welch*, ed. Paul Y. Hoskisson and Daniel C. Peterson (Orem, Utah: Interpreter Foundation, 2017), 317–31.

3. Pike, “Before Jeremiah Was,” 33.

4. See the discussion in Pike, “Formed in and Called from the Womb,” 317–31.

5. Martha T. Roth, trans., *Law Collections from Mesopotamia and Asia Minor*, 2nd ed. (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1997), 76–77.

Abraham's time says of the pharaoh Senwosret I (ca. 1950–1900 BC): "Men and women surpass exultation in him, now that he is king. He took possession [of kingship] in the egg; his face was toward it from before he was born. Those born with him are multiple, but he is a unique one of the god's giving."⁶ Additional texts from Abraham's lifetime and many centuries afterward point to this concept being both prevalent and long-lasting in Egyptian thought.⁷

Some ancient Egyptian monarchs even went so far as to claim that they were literal divine offspring. At her mortuary temple at Deir el-Bahri, for example, the queen Hatshepsut, who reigned circa 1473–1458 BC, commissioned a series of reliefs depicting herself as the literal daughter of the god Amun-Re who could, accordingly, claim a divine birthright to rule Egypt. The reliefs begin with a depiction of what Egyptologists call a "council of the gods,"⁸ where, in the midst of other important deities, Amun-Re foretells Hatshepsut's reign, followed by scenes of her divine conception, birth, and ascendancy to the throne.⁹

Abraham appears to have not held any kingly titles in mortality yet was designated a "noble and great one" who was foreordained to be a "ruler" (Abr. 3:22–23). This must certainly have been true at least in a priesthood authority sense, and unlike the counterfeit priesthood authority of pharaoh (Abr. 1:25–28), Abraham's foreordination to the priesthood was legitimate and ratified through a covenant with God (Abr. 2:6–11).¹⁰ Thus,

6. James P. Allen, *Middle Egyptian Literature: Eight Literary Works of the Middle Kingdom* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 87.

7. See, for instance, Wolfgang Helck, *Die Lehre für König Merikare* (Wiesbaden, Ger: Harrassowitz Verlag, 1977), 83–87; Adrian de Buck, "The Building Inscription of the Berlin Leather Roll," *Studia Aegyptiaca I, Analecta Orientalia* 17 (1938): 54; Kenneth A. Kitchen, *Ramesside Inscriptions: Historical and Biographical*, 8 vols. (Oxford: Blackwell, 1976), 2:284, 327, 356; 5:239; and Robert K. Ritner, trans., *The Libyan Anarchy: Inscriptions from Egypt's Third Intermediate Period*, ed. Edward Wente (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2009), 477–78.

8. James Henry Breasted, *Ancient Records of Egypt* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1906), 2:78; Edouard Naville, *The Temple of Deir el Bahari, Part II, Plates XXV–LV: The Ebony Shrine. Northern Half of the Middle Platform* (London: Egypt Exploration Fund, 1897), plate XLVI.

9. Naville, *Temple of Deir el Bahari, Part II*, 12–18, plates XLVI–LV; Edouard Naville, *The Temple of Deir el Bahari, Part III, Plates LVI–LXXXVI: End of Northern Half and Southern Half of the Middle Platform* (London: Egypt Exploration Fund, 1898), 1–9, plates LVI–LXVI.

10. See further John Gee, "The Abrahamic Covenant," in *An Introduction to the Book of Abraham* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book; Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 2017), 107–13.

by drawing attention to his foreordained status, Abraham may have been demonstrating how the power and divine authority usually associated with earthly kings was more legitimately and eternally endowed upon God's preordained earthly servants.

The Book of Abraham's teachings about foreordination and divine election are therefore important for the eternal truths they preserve and how they ground the text in a plausible ancient context.

Further Reading

Givens, Terryl. *When Souls Had Wings: Pre-mortal Existence in Western Thought*, 9–20, 215–16. New York: Oxford University Press, 2009.

Pike, Dana M. "Before Jeremiah Was: Divine Election in the Ancient Near East." In *A Witness for the Restoration: Essays in Honor of Robert J. Matthews*, edited by Kent P. Jackson and Andrew C. Skinner, 33–59. Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 2007.

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The Son of Man

In the Book of Abraham's divine-council scene, God proposes to send a redemptive emissary to ensure that those premortal intelligences or spirits who entered their second estate and faithfully did "all things whatsoever the Lord their God shall command them" would have "glory added upon their heads for ever and ever" (Abr. 3:25–26). When the Lord asked whom he should send to be this emissary, "one answered like unto the Son of Man: Here am I, send me. And another answered and said: Here am I, send me. And the Lord said: I will send the first" (v. 27). This "first" personage to answer the Lord's call for a mortal representative of his plan of redemption is identified in other books of scripture as Jesus Christ (Moses 4:1–2; Ether 3:14).¹ Here, however, the premortal Jesus is not explicitly named but rather is given the title "one . . . like unto the Son of Man."

The title "Son of Man" has some nuanced difference depending on the context of its usage.² In biblical Hebrew, the phrase "son of man" (*ben 'adam*) connotes simply "mortal, human."³ In the book of Ezekiel, for example, it is used by God when addressing the prophet (for example

1. Note, however, that Moses 4:1–2 depicts Lucifer as being the first to present himself. How to reconcile this with Abraham 3:27, if at all possible, remains elusive. For a general perspective, see Andrew C. Skinner, "The Premortal Godhood of Christ: A Restoration Perspective," in *Jesus Christ: Son of God, Savior*, ed. Paul H. Peterson, Gary L. Hatch, and Laura D. Card (Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 2002), 50–78.

2. For a discussion from a Latter-day Saint perspective, see S. Kent Brown, "Man and Son of Man: Issues of Theology and Christology," in *The Pearl of Great Price: Revelations from God*, ed. H. Donl Peterson and Charles D. Tate Jr. (Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 1989), 57–72.

3. Donald Senior, "Son of Man," in *Eerdmans Dictionary of the Bible*, ed. David Noel Freedman (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2000), 1242.

Ezek. 2:1, 3, 6, 8; 3:1, 3, 10; 4:1, 16; 5:1; 6:2). In apocalyptic biblical works, most notably the book of Daniel (7:13–14), the Son of Man (Aramaic: *bar 'enash*), or, more technically, a figure *like* (*kē*) a son of man, is depicted as a sort of eschatological figure who assumes rulership over the earth at the end of days. “The figure in this passage [Dan. 7:13–14] is one *like* a son of man, meaning a divine figure who looked like a human. He will have authority and will be worshipped by all people. Note also the language tying this figure to the Davidic kingship ideal, that he will be a king whose kingdom will be everlasting.”⁴

This divine figure was developed in apocalyptic Jewish works from the time of Jesus (such as the book of *1 Enoch*) into “a divine messianic figure” and “a premortal being who was closely associated with God, would have dominion over all earthly kingdoms, would be worshipped by all people, would judge the wicked and overthrow his enemies, would establish an everlasting kingdom, and would be the ‘Messiah.’”⁵ Believed by his disciples to be this very eschatological figure,⁶ Jesus is identified as the Son of Man throughout the canonical Gospels and other New Testament writings (compare Matt. 27:64; Rev. 1:13).

In Latter-day Saint understanding, the title Son of Man takes on additional significance. One of the Adamic names for God the Father is revealed in Restoration scripture to be “Man of Holiness” (Moses 6:57; 7:35). Apostles James E. Talmage and Bruce R. McConkie have both linked Jesus’s identity as the Son of Man with his divine parentage as the firstborn of this Man of Holiness (compare D&C 78:20; 93:21–22; 95:17).⁷ As Elder Talmage taught, “The word of revelation, given in this day, makes plain the meaning as to who was the one and only supremely

4. Trevan G. Hatch, “Messianism and Jewish Messiahs in the New Testament Period,” in *New Testament History, Culture, and Society: A Background to the Texts of the New Testament*, ed. Lincoln Blumell (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book; Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 2019), 75.

5. Hatch, “Messianism and Jewish Messiahs,” 76.

6. See, generally, Larry W. Hurtado and Paul L. Owen, eds., “*Who Is This Son of Man?*” *The Latest Scholarship on a Puzzling Expression of the Historical Jesus* (London: T&T Clark, 2011); and Benjamin E. Reynolds, ed., *The Son of Man Problem: Critical Readings* (London: T&T Clark, 2018).

7. James E. Talmage, “The Son of Man,” in *The Essential James E. Talmage*, ed. James P. Harris, Classics in Mormon Thought 5 (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1997), 135–41; *Eighty-fifth Annual Conference of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (April 1915): 120–24; and Bruce R. McConkie, *Mormon Doctrine*, 2nd ed. (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1966), 742–43.

glorified Man, whom Christ knew—God, the Eternal Father, the Father of the spirit of Jesus, and literally, the Father of His body. Therefore the title ‘The Son of Man’ is an appellation of glory, authority and power among all sons of men. The Son of Man is the Only Begotten of the one and only supremely glorified Man at that time.”⁸

That the Book of Abraham says Jesus was *like unto* the Son of Man, rather than being *the* Son of Man, might reflect the influence of the King James Version of the Bible on Joseph Smith’s translation, since that wording appears in Daniel 7:13 and Revelation 1:13. Alternatively, the comparative may have been used because Daniel 7, Revelation 1, and Abraham 3 are all visions, and the visionary *image* was *like unto* the actual Son of Man—that is, a sort of visionary or heavenly facsimile of the real thing.⁹

Whatever the case, the identity of the premortal Jesus as “one like unto the Son of Man” in the Book of Abraham might be understood simultaneously in the contexts discussed above. He is the firstborn of the Man of Holiness, the one who condescended to become a mortal “son of man” (compare 1 Ne. 11:14–36), and the foreordained Messiah.¹⁰

8. Talmage, “Son of Man,” 139.

9. An intriguing alternative possibility is that the Book of Abraham’s language in this verse (“one answered *like unto* the Son of Man”) reflects an underlying Egyptianism—what is called by grammarians the “*m* of predication.” In the Egyptian language of Abraham’s day, the preposition *m* (“in, inside,” “by means of, with,” “being, namely,” “of, with,” and so forth) could be used in an adverbial comment to indicate that someone or something serves in a certain capacity. This common usage of the adverbial predicate in Middle Egyptian acts to distinguish people and things by their function rather than by their intrinsic essence or nature. The simple examples used by grammarians are sentences like **iw=k m s3-i* (“you are [*like* or *as*] a son to me”) and *iw=k m sš* (“you are [*acting as*] a scribe”). See James E. Hoch, *Middle Egyptian Grammar* (Mississauga, Can.: Benben Publications, 1997), §24; compare James P. Allen, *Middle Egyptian: An Introduction to the Language and Culture of Hieroglyphs*, 3rd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), §10.6; and Alan Gardiner, *Egyptian Grammar*, 3rd rev. ed. (Oxford: Griffith Institute, 1957), §38. If we pursue this line of thinking, then the Book of Abraham’s statement that “the first” was “*like unto* the Son of Man” would indicate that the premortal Jesus was answering the call to act or serve in the capacity of the “Son of Man” (that is, the redemptive eschatological figure prepared in the premortal council to effect the Father’s plan).

10. David Rolph Seely and Jo Ann H. Seely, “Jesus the Messiah: Prophet, Priest and King,” in Peterson, Hatch, and Card, *Jesus Christ: Son of God, Savior*, 248–69.

Further Reading

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The Fall of Lucifer

Similar to what is depicted in other books of Latter-day Saint scripture (for example Moses 4:1–4), the Book of Abraham’s depiction of the premortal council includes a brief mention of the fall of Lucifer. As readers encounter at the end of chapter 3 of the Book of Abraham, Lucifer’s fall from the divine council was an act of rebellion because he was not selected to carry out God’s plan of salvation.

And there stood one among them that was like unto God, and he said unto those who were with him: We will go down, for there is space there, and we will take of these materials, and we will make an earth whereon these may dwell; and we will prove them herewith, to see if they will do all things whatsoever the Lord their God shall command them; and they who keep their first estate shall be added upon; and they who keep not their first estate shall not have glory in the same kingdom with those who keep their first estate; and they who keep their second estate shall have glory added upon their heads for ever and ever. And the Lord said: Whom shall I send? And one answered like unto the Son of Man: Here am I, send me. And another answered and said: Here am I, send me. And the Lord said: I will send the first. And the second was angry, and kept not his first estate; and, at that day, many followed after him. (Abr. 3:24–28)

While later biblical and extrabiblical writings from the first millennium BC contain reworked allusions to pervasive Near Eastern myths about the fall of rebellious deities or angels (for example, Gen. 6:1–4; Isa. 14; Job 38; Ps. 82; Ezek. 28:1–10; 28:11–19; and Dan. 11–12),¹ a fair question

1. On this topic, consult Hugh Rowland Page Jr., *The Myth of Cosmic Rebellion: A Study of Its Reflexes in Ugaritic and Biblical Literature* (Leiden, Neth.: Brill, 1996); R. Mark Shipp, *Of Dead Kings and Dirges: Myth and Meaning in Isaiah 14:4b–21* (Atlanta:

to ask is whether this mythic archetype is attested in Near Eastern literature from Abraham's day. In fact, there does appear to be evidence for elements of this mythic concept in the literature of earlier Near Eastern cultures.

Biblical scholar Mark Smith has recently drawn attention to the "basic idea" underlying the myth of the "conflict between competing deities in the divine realm" being present in texts from the Middle and Late Bronze Age sites of Mari and Ugarit. "These cases of divine conflict are set in the divine council that meets in heaven; they end in the demotion or expulsion of the defeated deity."² In the Mari corpus is a letter from Šamaš-našir, the governor of the city of Terqa, to Zimri-Lim, the king of Mari from circa 1775 to 1760 BC.³ In this text, Šamaš-našir "gives account of a vision concerning a heavenly verdict" by the god Dagan, the chief deity of Mari, against other deities, including the god Tišpak of the city Ešnunna. "This is done in the presence of other gods" in the divine council and "corresponds to Zimri-Lim's hoped-for victory over King Ibalpiel II of Ešnunna, whose god [Tišpak]—and, through him, the king himself—is threatened with" destruction.⁴ As the relevant section of the text reads, "[Now, let them c]all [Tišpak before me] and I will pass judgment.' So they called on Tišpak for me, and Dagan said to Tišpak as follows: 'From Šinaḥ (?) you have ruled the land. Now your day has passed. You will confront your day like [the city] Ekallatum.'"⁵

As scholars recognize, this text clearly depicts a divine-council scene where "a denial of the right of [another deity] to rule" is issued by the edict of a superior deity.⁶ As such, it provides broad parallel with and precedent to later biblical texts that depict the fall of rebellious divinities,⁷ as well as the Book of Abraham.

Society of Biblical Literature, 2002), esp. 81–127; and Mark S. Smith, *The Genesis of Good and Evil: The Fall(out) and Original Sin in the Bible* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2019), 15–28.

2. Smith, *Genesis of Good and Evil*, 22.

3. Reproduced in "6. Šamaš-našir to Zimri-Lim," in *Prophets and Prophecy in the Ancient Near East*, ed. Peter Machinist (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2003), 26–27.

4. Martti Nissinen, "Prophets and the Divine Council," in *Kein Land für sich allein: Studien zum Kulturkontakt in Kanaan, Israel/Palästina und Ebirnâri für Manfred Weippert zum 65. Geburtstag*, ed. Ulrich Hübner and Ernst Akel Knauf (Freiburg, Switz.: Universitätsverlag; Göttingen, Ger.: Vanderhoeck und Ruprecht, 2002), 9.

5. "6. Šamaš-našir to Zimri-Lim," 27, punctuation slightly modified and footnotes removed.

6. Mark S. Smith, *God in Translation: Cross-Cultural Recognition of Deities in the Biblical World*, rep. ed. (Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans, 2010), 138.

7. Smith, *God in Translation*, 137–39.

Turning to the material from Ugarit, the Late Bronze Age text known as the Baal Cycle depicts “cases of divine conflict [which] are set in the divine council that meets in heaven; they end in the demotion or expulsion of the defeated deity.”⁸ One such scene from the Baal Cycle (*KTU* 1.2 I 19–48) narrates how the god Baal defiantly rebuked the messenger gods of his rival, the deity Yamm, after they brought the divine council a message demanding surrender. The cycle ends with Baal defeating Yamm and claiming kingship in the divine council (*KTU* 1.2 IV 30–41).⁹ That the Ugaritic Baal Cycle provides clear underlying mythic and literary precedent for later biblical iterations of this type-scene is widely recognized by scholars.¹⁰

The mythic tales of Illuyanka and Kumarbi from ancient Anatolia might also provide additional parallels to the rebellion of Lucifer in the Book of Abraham.¹¹ In the Illuyanka tales, which date to the Old Hittite period (ca. 1750–1500 BC), the chief deity of the people of Hatti, a storm god, is “defeat[ed] and incapacitat[ed] . . . by an evil and powerful reptile. . . . In both versions of the myth, the Storm God needs the help of a mortal and a trick in order to regain supremacy over the serpent.”¹² In the second version of the myth, the storm god battles and ultimately prevails over the serpent at “an unspecified sea.”¹³

Finally, in the Hurrian Kumarbi Cycle (ca. 1400–1200 BC), “the central theme . . . is the competition between [the gods] Kumarbi and Tessub for kingship over the gods.”¹⁴ This mythic cycle depicts how Kumarbi “attempt[ed] . . . to supplant Tessub as king of the gods” through stratagem. This included one attempt where Kumarbi raised up his son Ullikummi “to destroy . . . the city of Tessub, and to dethrone Tessub” himself. Tessub, however, concocts his own plan for defeating Ullikummi with the help of members of the divine council, which he eventually does.¹⁵

8. Smith, *Genesis of Good and Evil*, 22.

9. Smith, *Genesis of Good and Evil*, 22, 107 n. 42. A translation of the Baal Cycle can be accessed in Simon B. Parker, ed., *Ugaritic Narrative Poetry* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 1997), 81–180.

10. For a summary of the scholarly consensus, see Page, *Myth of Cosmic Rebellion*; compare Smith, *Genesis of Good and Evil*, 22–24; and Michael D. Coogan and Mark S. Smith, eds. and trans., *Stories from Ancient Canaan*, 2nd ed. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2012), 97–109.

11. For translations of these texts, see Harry A. Hoffner Jr., *Hittite Myths*, 2nd ed. (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 1998), 9–14, 40–80.

12. Hoffner, *Hittite Myths*, 10–11.

13. Hoffner, *Hittite Myths*, 13.

14. Hoffner, *Hittite Myths*, 41.

15. Hoffner, *Hittite Myths*, 55–56.

There are very clear differences between these texts and the Book of Abraham. For instance, the mythological texts from Ugarit and elsewhere just reviewed appear to be largely about competing deities who are associated with the agricultural cycle or are represented as chthonic and sky deities in competition. These elements are missing from the Book of Abraham's depiction. While we should be cautious not to suggest that the Book of Abraham is directly drawing from these texts, or vice versa, important parallels nevertheless do remain which are indicative of a general shared cultural and religious backdrop. The common elements in these ancient Near Eastern and Anatolian myths and the Book of Abraham include the divine council as the setting, the involvement of multiple divinities or gods, some kind of attempt to supplant or overthrow the chief deity of the council in an overt act of rebellion or defiance,¹⁶ and the ultimate humiliation or downfall of the rebellious character.

From this and other evidence,¹⁷ "several striking affinities with Semitic traditions are immediately available" in the Book of Abraham. As seen above, "the council scene in particular is consistent with a standard motif in Mesopotamian and Ugaritic literature, wherein a divine assembly convenes to consider a problem and a series of proposals is offered."¹⁸ This in turn reinforces the overall sense of antiquity and historical believability of the book.

16. The Book of Abraham does not make this point as explicitly as other Restoration scripture, such as the book of Moses, which depicts Satan as seeking "to destroy the agency of man, which . . . the Lord God, had given him," and also demanding "that [God] should give unto him [his] own power." This Satan does by proclaiming, "Behold, here am I, send me, I will be thy son, and I will redeem all mankind, that one soul shall not be lost, and surely I will do it; wherefore give me thine honor" (Moses 4:1, 3). Nevertheless, the implication that Satan is actively rebelling against God in the Book of Abraham can be seen in his being described as "angry" at God's decision to choose the one "like unto the Son of Man." Additionally, that "many followed after [Satan]" (Abr. 3:27–28) also suggests a collective act of rebellion.

17. David E. Bokovoy, "‘Ye Really Are Gods’: A Response to Michael Heiser Concerning the LDS Use of Psalm 82 and the Gospel of John," *FARMS Review* 19, no. 1 (2007): 267–313, esp. 272–79; Stephen O. Smoot, "Council, Chaos, and Creation in the Book of Abraham," *Journal of the Book of Mormon and Other Restoration Scripture* 22, no. 2 (2013): 28–39.

18. Terryl L. Givens, *When Souls Had Wings: Pre-mortal Existence in Western Thought* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 215–16; compare Terryl Givens with Brian M. Hauglid, *The Pearl of Greatest Price: Mormonism's Most Controversial Scripture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), 125–28.

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Creation from Chaos

Traditional Christianity teaches that God created the universe *ex nihilo*, or “out of nothing.” As explained by one scholar, “the most widely accepted theistic explanation of initial creation is the theory that God created the universe from absolutely nothing. . . . Most major theologians in Christian history—for example, Irenaeus, Augustine, Catherine of Sienna, Thomas Aquinas, Martin Luther, John Calvin, John Wesley, Karl Barth, and Paul Tilich—believed that God initially created the universe from absolutely nothing. . . . Many influential Christians throughout history have affirmed the theory.”¹

By contrast, Joseph Smith taught that God created the universe *ex materia*, or out of preexisting matter. “The learned men who are preaching salvation say, that God created the heavens and the earth out of nothing,” the Prophet acknowledged in a sermon on April 7, 1844. However, he maintained, the word *bārā* in Genesis 1:1 actually “means to organize” in the similar sense that “a man would organize a ship.” Accordingly, the Prophet reasoned that “God had materials to organize the world out of chaos; chaotic matter, which is element, and in which dwells all the glory.”²

1. Thomas Jay Oord, “Creatio Ex Nihilo: An Introduction,” in *Theologies of Creation: Creatio Ex Nihilo and Its New Rivals*, ed. Thomas Jay Oord (New York: Routledge, 2015), 2.

2. “Conference Minutes,” *Times and Seasons* 5, no. 15 (August 15, 1844): 615. This portion of the amalgamated version of the sermon appears to derive from Thomas Bullock’s audit, which is substantively similar to the published version. See “Discourse, 7 April 1844, as Reported by Thomas Bullock,” 18, Joseph Smith Papers, accessed February 9, 2023, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/discourse-7-april-1844-as-reported-by-thomas-bullock/5>. The relevant portion of the Bullock audit reads, “The learned me[n] who are preach[in]g. Salⁿ. say that God created the Heavens & the Earth out of nothing & the reason is that they are unlearned & I know more than all the world put tog^r. & if the H. G. in me com[prehends]: more than all the world I will associate with it— what does Boro mean it means to organize same as you wo^d. organize a Ship— God

This teaching is also found in the Book of Abraham,³ and the Prophet's later teachings about Creation may well indeed have been influenced by his translation of Abraham's record and his study of Hebrew related thereto (although without the ability to check against an original Abrahamic manuscript, we should be careful not to assume too much about the nature of the Hebrew terminology in the text).⁴

According to the Book of Abraham, there was one in the premortal council "like unto God," who proclaimed: "We will go down, for there is space there, and we will take of these materials, and we will make an earth whereon these may dwell" (Abr. 3:24).⁵ In the next chapter, the text says that the Gods (the members of the heavenly council) "organized and formed the heavens and the earth" as opposed to *creating* them (Abr. 4:1).⁶ The verbs *organize* and *form* are used throughout the Book of Abraham's Creation account instead of *create*, clearly indicating some kind of divine activity or fashioning of material as opposed to creating all matter *ex nihilo*.

Scholars now recognize that the ancient cultures of Egypt, Syria-Canaan, and Mesopotamia did not seem to countenance ideas of creation *ex nihilo* but rather envisioned creation as the emergence of an ordered cosmos out of preexisting chaos. This preordered chaos is often personified as a primordial cosmic ocean or as a primeval cosmic combat

himself had materials to org[anize] the world out of chaos which is Element & in which dwells all the glory"

3. See the overview in Stephen O. Smoot, "Council, Chaos, and Creation in the Book of Abraham," *Journal of the Book of Mormon and Other Restoration Scripture* 22, no. 2 (2013): 28–39.

4. Joseph Smith's study of Hebrew appears very likely to have influenced his translation of the Book of Abraham, including the decision to render the verbs of activity in the text's Creation account as *organize* and *form*. The lexicon utilized by Joseph as he studied Hebrew in Kirtland defines the verb *bārā* as "to form, make, create," although not "organize." Josiah W. Gibbs, *Manual Hebrew and English Lexicon* (New Haven, Conn.: Hezekiah Howe, 1832), 36. As recognized by one scholar, however, it is "doubtful" that Joseph got his teaching of creation *ex materia* from his study of Hebrew alone. Louis C. Zucker, "Joseph Smith as a Student of Hebrew," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 3, no. 2 (Summer 1968): 52. The extent to which Joseph's study of Hebrew influenced his later teachings and translations thus remains open to discussion. For a recent perspective, see Matthew J. Grey, "'The Word of the Lord in the Original': Joseph Smith's Study of Hebrew in Kirtland," in *Approaching Antiquity: Joseph Smith and the Ancient World*, ed. Lincoln H. Blumell, Matthew J. Grey, and Andrew H. Hedges (Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2015), 249–302.

5. See "The Son of Man," 159–62 herein.

6. See "The Divine Council," 150–54 herein.

between gods in ancient Near Eastern creation myths.⁷ For instance, in ancient Egyptian mythology, the earth first emerged as a primeval hill-ock, springing out of a preexisting, chaotic, and unorganized primordial ocean called Nun.⁸ In the Mesopotamian myth known as *Enuma Elish* (from the opening lines of the text meaning “when on high” in ancient Akkadian), the evil goddess Tiamat is defeated in battle by the god Marduk, and her body is split in half to form the cosmos.⁹

Although not obvious from reading the King James translation, Creation is similarly imagined in the Bible as order emerging from a state of disorder. As the biblical scholar Marc Zvi Brettler has noted, “The opposite of structure is chaos, and it is thus appropriate that [Genesis] 1:1–2 describe primeval chaos—a world that is ‘unformed and void,’ containing darkness and a mysterious wind. This story does not describe creation out of nothing (Latin: *creatio ex nihilo*). Primeval stuff already exists in verses 1–2, and the text shows no concern for how it originated. Rather, it is a[n account] about how God alone structured primordial matter into a highly organized world.”¹⁰

7. For representative scholarly overviews of this topic, consult Robert A. Oden Jr., “Cosmology, Cosmology,” in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. David Noel Freedman, 6 vols. (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 1:1162–71, esp. 1164–65; Shalom M. Paul, “Creation and Cosmogony in the Bible,” in *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, ed. Fred Skolnik, 2nd ed. (Detroit: Thomson Gale, 2007), 5:273–75; and Abraham Winitzer, “Chaos. I. Ancient Near East,” in *Encyclopedia of the Bible and Its Reception*, ed. Constance M. Furey and others, vol. 4, *Birsha—Chariot of Fire* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2012), 1158–59. See also generally John H. Walton, *Ancient Near Eastern Thought and the Old Testament: Introducing the Conceptual World of the Hebrew Bible* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2006), 179–95; and John H. Walton, *Genesis 1 as Ancient Cosmology* (Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 2011), esp. 23–121.

8. Günter Burkard, “Vorstellungen vom Kosmos—Die Weltgebäude,” in *Ägypten: Die Welt der Pharaonen*, ed. Regine Schulz and Matthias Seidel (Germany: Könnemann, 1997), 447. See also Geraldine Pinch, *Egyptian Mythology: A Guide to the Gods, Goddesses, and Traditions of Ancient Egypt* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 172–73; and Richard H. Wilkinson, *The Complete Gods and Goddesses of Ancient Egypt* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 2003), 117–18.

9. “The Epic of Creation,” in *Myths from Mesopotamia: Creation, the Flood, Gilgamesh, and Others*, rev. ed., trans. Stephanie Dalley (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 228–77; Joshua J. Mark, “Enuma Elish—the Babylonian Epic of Creation—Full Text,” May 4, 2018, World History Encyclopedia, <https://www.worldhistory.org/article/225/enuma-elish---the-babylonian-epic-of-creation---fu/>; Thorkild Jacobsen, “The Battle between Marduk and Tiamat,” *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 88, no. 1 (1968): 104–8; Mary K. Wakeman, *God’s Battle with the Monster: A Study in Biblical Imagery* (Leiden, Neth.: Brill, 1973), 16–24.

10. Marc Zvi Brettler, *How to Read the Bible* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2005), 41. See also the comment by Hermann Spieckermann, “Creation: God and

This may hold significance for the Book of Abraham's depiction of the Gods "ordering" the elements of the cosmos, which "obey" when so commanded (Abr. 4:7, 9–12, 18, 21, 25). This language ultimately "con-jures [imagery] typical of the Near Eastern creation mythology . . . of kingly dominion establishing order over a previously chaotic cosmos."¹¹ So while the Book of Abraham's teachings about Creation might be out of place in the typical Christian thinking of Joseph Smith's day, they are not out of place in the world of the ancient Near East.

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World," in *The Hebrew Bible: A Critical Companion*, ed. John Barton (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014), 275. "God's creation as described at the beginning of the Bible is not a creative act out of nothing. The conception of *creatio ex nihilo* first came to the fore in Hellenistic Judaism (2 Macc. 7:28). After the heading of Gen. 1:1 comes a description of the world before God's first deed, the generation of light. Three elements characterize the world at this time: *tôhû wābôhû* (formless and void), *hōšek* (darkness), and *têhôm* (the deep). Present in Mesopotamian myths and even Old Testament texts, this triad alludes to Chaos. The term *têhôm* betrays an inherent conception of Chaos."

11. Smoot, "Council, Chaos, and Creation in the Book of Abraham," 34.

Ancient Near Eastern Creation Myths

The Book of Abraham's Creation account (Abr. 4–5) shares an obvious relationship with the biblical Creation account in Genesis (Gen. 1–2). However, it also shares common features with creation myths from ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia.

Turning to the Egyptian evidence, “the order of the creation process in the Book of Abraham is similar to that provided in Coffin Text 80, a text that appears in copies dating from about two hundred years before Abraham down to Abraham’s time, and is the only lengthy creation text we know of from that time.”¹ This text begins with a depiction of a primordial chaos (“the Abyss, in darkness and in gloom”²), which, like that in the Book of Abraham, clearly rules out a depiction of creation *ex nihilo*, or “out of nothing.” In this account,

the creator was “one who lit up the sky after the darkness.” The creator discusses the time when “I could not find a place to stand or to sit, before Heliopolis was founded so that I could be in it, before reeds were tied on which I could sit, before I made heaven so that it could be over my head . . . before the divine council existed.” Then the creator “begat the eldest of his spirits . . . when he separated earth from heaven,” and then he “made grain.” Various animals are given life: falcons, jackals, pigs, hippopotami, men, crocodiles, and fish “according to the command of” the creator “so that I may lead them to live with my mouth, which is life in their nostrils. I guided my breath into their throats.” The account has a

1. John Gee, *An Introduction to the Book of Abraham* (Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2017), 132. On Coffin Text 80 in general, see Jan Assmann, *The Search for God in Ancient Egypt*, trans. David Lorton (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2001), 177–83.

2. R. O. Faulkner, *The Ancient Egyptian Coffin Texts, Volume I: Spells 1–354* (Warminster, U.K.: Aris and Phillips, 1973), 83.

number of other details, but it discusses similar topics in a similar order to the Book of Abraham.³

Considering that Abraham was directed to declare his teachings about astronomy and creation to the Egyptians (Abr. 3:15), it is favorable for the Book of Abraham's historicity that "the accounts are close enough for ancient Egyptians to find something in the Book of Abraham that would provide familiar echoes to their own accounts."⁴

Additionally, "there are . . . parallels between the Book of Abraham and contemporary Mesopotamian creation accounts," although these parallels are more general and in some cases only cursory.⁵ One such account, the myth of the gods Enki and Ninmah, "refers to the 'day when heaven [was separated] from earth,' and it follows with a discussion of the creation of humans by mixing the blood of a God with the clay from which humans were made. . . . [It also depicts] the separation of heaven and earth before the making of mortals."⁶ This text also directly mentions the primeval chaos, aligning with the Book of Abraham in rejecting creation *ex nihilo*.⁷ Other Mesopotamian creation myths also portray the separation of heaven and earth and the creation of humans in the same general order as the Book of Abraham, although the purposes behind the creation of humans are different in these accounts.⁸

Another interesting similarity between the Book of Abraham's Creation account and ancient Mesopotamian creation myths is that "the creation of man is connected with the sacrifice of a god" in these texts.⁹ This is seen in one myth where gods are slaughtered, and from their

3. Gee, *Introduction to the Book of Abraham*, 132–33. Additional translations of this text can be found in Faulkner, *Ancient Egyptian Coffin Texts, Volume I*, 83–87; James P. Allen, "From Coffin Texts Spell 80," in *The Context of Scripture, Volume I: Canonical Compositions from the Biblical World*, ed. William W. Hallo (Leiden, Neth.: Brill, 2003), 11–14.

4. Gee, *Introduction to the Book of Abraham*, 133.

5. Gee, *Introduction to the Book of Abraham*, 133.

6. Gee, *Introduction to the Book of Abraham*, 133, citing W. G. Lambert, *Babylonian Creation Myths* (Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 2013), 334–37.

7. Lambert, *Babylonian Creation Myths*, 335.

8. Gee, *Introduction to the Book of Abraham*, 134. "Though the explicit purpose of life between the two accounts is similar, for the Babylonians, the purpose of life was to do heavy labor for the benefit of the gods so that the gods would no longer have to work. In the Book of Abraham, life is a test to 'prove them herewith, to see if they will do all things whatsoever the Lord their God shall command them' (Abraham 3:25). Such a test may include serving God or their fellowman and might involve hard work, but it may also involve many other things—and it involves more than simply being a slave to take over menial tasks. The Book of Abraham promises rewards for obedience which are missing from the Babylonian text."

9. Gee, *Introduction to the Book of Abraham*, 136.

blood humankind is fashioned,¹⁰ as well as in the myth of Atrahasis, in which humans are created from the flesh and blood of the sacrificed god Weila mixed with clay.¹¹

In the Book of Abraham this [connection with sacrifice] is mentioned obliquely: “The Lord said: Whom shall I send? And one answered like unto the Son of Man: Here am I, send me. And another answered and said: Here am I, send me. And the Lord said: I will send the first” (Abraham 3:27). Latter-day Saints connect this with other accounts of the pre-existence to equate the one “like unto the Son of Man” with the premortal Jesus and the other with Lucifer (see Moses 4:1–4) and that the creation of man was dependent on the Son of God being willing to offer himself as an atonement for humans. The parallel, however, is with Latter-day Saint interpretation of the Book of Abraham and not the text of the Book of Abraham as we currently have it. That might be different if we had the full Book of Abraham.¹²

These parallels between the Book of Abraham’s Creation account and ancient Egyptian and Mesopotamian myths serve nicely in situating the text in a plausible ancient Near Eastern context in Abraham’s day.

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10. Gee, *Introduction to the Book of Abraham*, 134; compare Lambert, *Babylonian Creation Myths*, 355.

11. Gee, *Introduction to the Book of Abraham*, 134, citing W. G. Lambert and A. R. Millard, *Atra-ḫasis* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969), 58.

12. Gee, *Introduction to the Book of Abraham*, 136.

By His Own Hand upon Papyrus

In the current (2013) edition of the Pearl of Great Price, the Book of Abraham is prefaced with this explanatory head: “A Translation of some ancient Records that have fallen into our hands from the catacombs of Egypt. The writings of Abraham while he was in Egypt, called the Book of Abraham, written by his own hand, upon papyrus.”¹ This title is based on the March 1, 1842, printing of the Book of Abraham in the *Times and Seasons*, with some alteration. As first published, the statement read, “A TRANSLATION of some ancient Records that have fallen into our hands, from the Catacombs of Egypt, purporting to be the writings of Abraham, while he was in Egypt, called the Book of Abraham, written by his own hand, upon papyrus.”² A look at the Kirtland-era manuscript evidence for the Book of Abraham reveals a similar phrase: “Translation of the Book of Abraham written by his own hand upon papyrus and found in the CataCombs of Egypts.”³

1. *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), 29.

2. “The Book of Abraham,” *Times and Seasons* 3, no. 9 (March 1, 1842): 704. The Salt Lake City 1878 edition of the Pearl of Great Price dropped the phrase “purporting to be” from the title. This omission was retained in subsequent editions, including the 1902 edition prepared by James E. Talmage that serves as the basis for the 1981 and current 2013 editions of the book.

3. Robin Scott Jensen and Brian Hauglid, eds., *Revelations and Translations, Volume 4: Book of Abraham and Related Manuscripts*, Joseph Smith Papers (Salt Lake City: Church Historian’s Press, 2018), 219. To view the manuscript online, see “Book of Abraham Manuscript, circa July–circa November 1835–C [Abraham 1:1–2:18],” Joseph Smith Papers, accessed January 26, 2023, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/book-of-abraham-manuscript-circa-july-circa-november-1835-c-abraham-11-218/1>.

Some have wondered how the papyrus acquired by Joseph Smith could have possibly been written by Abraham's "own hand" when it dates to circa 300 BC, many centuries after Abraham's lifetime.⁴ Before answering this question, the first issue to resolve is whether the phrase "by his own hand, upon papyrus," was part of the ancient Book of Abraham text or a modern statement by Joseph Smith or his scribes reflecting their beliefs about the nature of the papyri. Some evidence can be interpreted to suggest that Joseph Smith and other early Latter-day Saints believed the Egyptian papyri they acquired were as old as Abraham himself,⁵ although caution is necessary in evaluating this evidence, since some of these sources are hearsay and "may have confused 'written by the hand of Abraham' (authorship) with 'handwriting of Abraham' (his personal penmanship)."⁶ Even if the phrase "written by his own hand, upon papyrus," reflects an assumption by Joseph Smith or other nineteenth-century Latter-day Saints about the age of the papyri, this would not necessarily diminish the historicity or authenticity of the

4. Marc Coenen, "The Dating of the Papyri Joseph Smith I, X and XI and Min Who Massacres His Enemies," in *Egyptian Religion: The Last Thousand Years, Part I: Studies Dedicated to the Memory of Jan Quaegebeur*, ed. Willy Clarysse, Antoon Schoors, and Harco Willems (Leuven, Belg.: Peeters, 1998), 1103–15; Michael D. Rhodes, *The Hor Book of Breathings: A Translation and Commentary* (Provo, Utah: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 2002), 3.

5. Joseph Smith, "Editorial, circa 1 March 1842, Draft," 1, in *Documents, Volume 9: December 1841–April 1842*, ed. Alex D. Smith, Christian K. Heimbürger, and Christopher James Blythe, Joseph Smith Papers (Salt Lake City: The Church Historian's Press, 2019), 207; "A Glance at the Mormons," *Alexandria Gazette*, July 11, 1840, [2]; "The Mormon Population of Montrose and Nauvoo," *Boston Evening Transcript* 15 (January 20, 1844): 2; Charles Francis Adams Sr., Journal, May 15, 1844, repr. in Henry Adams, "Charles Francis Adams Visits the Mormons in 1844," *Proceedings of the Massachusetts Historical Society* 68 (October 1944–May 1947): 285; Henry Halkett, "Henry's Notes upon Joe Smith the Prophet [May 1844]," circa 1845, 5–6, Miscellaneous Collection, William L. Clements Library, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, Mich.; Josiah Quincy, "The Mormons—a Sketch of Their History," *Portsmouth Journal of Literature and Politics* 65, no. 4 (January 28, 1854): [1]; *Figures of the Past from the Leaves of Old Journals* (Boston: Roberts Brothers, 1883), 386; Wilford Woodruff, "Journal (January 1, 1841–December 31, 1842)," February 19, 1842, Wilford Woodruff Papers, accessed January 26, 2023, <https://wilfordwoodruffpapers.org/documents/a9d1a2cb-18fe-445d-a5e4-350caaf63442/page/28532206-eb7f-4fe4-b955-9b5763ab18d6>; Parley P. Pratt, "Notices," *Latter-day Saints' Millennial Star* 3, no. 2 (June 1852): 32.

6. Terryl Givens with Brian M. Hauglid, *The Pearl of Greatest Price: Mormonism's Most Controversial Scripture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), 155. See also the discussion in John Gee, "Eyewitness, Hearsay, and Physical Evidence of the Joseph Smith Papyrus," in *The Disciple as Witness: Essays on Latter-day Saint History and Doctrine in Honor of Richard Lloyd Anderson*, ed. Stephen D. Ricks, Donald W. Parry, and Andrew H. Hedges (Provo, Utah: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 2000), 192–95.



FIGURE 24. A relief at the mortuary complex at Saqqara depicting ancient Egyptian scribes with their scribal equipment in the act of writing. Photograph by Stephen O. Smoot.

Book of Abraham for the same reason that Joseph Smith’s assumptions about the contents of the Book of Mormon (such as its geography) as the translator of that text do not necessarily diminish the Nephite record’s historicity or authenticity.⁷

What’s more, in contrast to the manuscript version, this published version of this statement in the *Times and Seasons* has commas that separate “written by his own hand” from the rest of the phrase, so that it could be read as saying “purporting to be the writings of Abraham . . . upon papyrus,” with everything else being parenthetical. It could even be read as “some ancient records that have fallen into our hands, from the catacombs of Egypt . . . upon papyrus,” merely stating on what medium the writings came. To be sure, the manuscript version of the phrase seems to push against this interpretation, given that the ordering of the phrase makes it harder to separate “by his own hand” from “upon papyrus,” but the point still remains that the documentary evidence is not altogether clear enough to know precisely what Joseph Smith may have been assuming.

On the other hand, some scholars have argued that the phrase “the Book of Abraham, written by his own hand, upon papyrus,” was the ancient title of the text itself. As they have observed, the phrase “by his own hand,”

7. See the comments in John E. Clark, “Archaeological Trends and Book of Mormon Origins,” in *The Worlds of Joseph Smith: A Bicentennial Conference at the Library of Congress*, ed. John W. Welch (Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University Press, 2006), 84–87, which apply just as well to the Book of Abraham.

or something like it, was used in ancient Egypt simply to denote authorship.⁸ For example, one ancient Egyptian text features this line: “[If it (so) happens] that you want to recite a writing, come to me, so that I can have you taken to the place where this (particular) Book [lit. “papyrus”] is, of which Thoth was the one who wrote it with his own hand, himself, when he had come down after the (other) gods.”⁹

The literal idiom used here in ancient Egyptian is “with his own hand” (*[n-]ḏr.t=f ḥ=f*), which indeed denotes authorship.¹⁰ A similar idiom—“written . . . with his own fingers” (*m ḏb^cw=f*)—is also attested in ancient Egypt as a way to attribute authorship.¹¹ The idiom “by/in the hand” to denote authorship, authority, or possession (“in the possession, charge of,” “from,” “through,” “because of,” “be done by,” and so forth) also appears in the Egyptian language as spoken in Abraham’s day (*m-^c*), reinforcing the possibility that the phrase was original to the ancient text prepared by Abraham.¹² (It even survives into Coptic, the latest and

8. Hugh Nibley, “As Things Stand at the Moment,” *BYU Studies* 9, no. 1 (1969): 74–78; Hugh Nibley, *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), 4–9; compare John Gee, “Were Egyptian Texts Divinely Written?,” in *Proceedings of the Ninth International Congress of Egyptologists*, ed. J. C. Goyon and C. Cardin (Leuven, Belg.: Peeters, 2007), 807; and John Gee, “Literary Titles from the Greco-Roman Period,” in *En détail—Philologie und Archäologie im Diskurs: Festschrift für Hans-W. Fischer-Elfert*, ed. Marc Brose and others (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2019), 344–45.

9. Steve Vinson, *The Craft of a Good Scribe: History, Narrative and Meaning in the First Tale of Setne Khaemwas* (Leiden, Neth.: Brill, 2017), 114; compare Miriam Lichtheim, *Ancient Egyptian Literature, Volume III: The Late Period* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), 118; William K. Simpson, “The Romance of Setna Khaemwas and the Mummies (Setna I),” in *The Literature of Ancient Egypt: An Anthology of Stories, Instructions, Stelae, Autobiographies, and Poetry*, ed. William Kelly Simpson, 3rd ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 456; and James Allen, *The Ancient Egyptian Language: An Historical Study* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 191.

10. Janet H. Johnson, ed., *The Demotic Dictionary of the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago* (Chicago: Oriental Institute, 2001), 60; Janet H. Johnson, *Thus Wrote Onchsheshonqy: An Introductory Grammar of Demotic*, 3rd ed. (Chicago: Oriental Institute, 2000), 31; see also the discussion in Gee, “Were Egyptian Texts Divinely Written?,” 807–10, esp. 809; and Gee, “Literary Titles from the Greco-Roman Period,” 344–45.

11. Gee, “Were Egyptian Texts Divinely Written?,” 809, citing P. Louvre 3284 2, 8/9, and other texts.

12. Alan Gardiner, *Egyptian Grammar*, 3rd ed. (Oxford: Griffith Institute, 1957), §178; James Hoch, *Middle Egyptian Grammar* (Mississauga, Can.: Benben Publications, 1997), §81.

final stage of the Egyptian language.¹³) For example, a stela belonging to the Egyptian king Kamose (ca. 1550 BC) describes how he intercepted a messenger with a letter written by his enemy, the Hyksos king Apophis. “For it was on the upland way of the oasis that I captured his messenger going south to Kush with a written letter,” the stela says.¹⁴ The letter is then reproduced on the stela in full.¹⁵ Although it is a copy of a text that was almost certainly originally written by a court scribe, the letter is nevertheless said in Kamose’s stela to have been literally written “by the hand” of the Hyksos ruler, meaning it was from him or that he otherwise claimed ownership of its content: “I found it [the letter; *šꜥꜥ*] saying in writing: ‘By the hand of the ruler of Avaris, Aa-User-Re, the Son of Re, Apophis, hail to my son, the ruler of Kush.’”¹⁶

This phrase also appears in the Bible. For example, some prophetic books speak of oracles or “the word of the Lord” coming through or by certain prophets (for example, Mal. 1:1; Hag. 1:1; 2:1; Zech. 7:7, 12). The literal Hebrew idiom in these passages, however, is “by/in the hand” (*bē yad*). In the New Testament, some of Paul’s epistles conclude with a short phrase indicating the Apostle wrote them “with his own hand,” even though he surely employed scribes in helping him compose his letters, and even after those letters were recopied by subsequent scribes (see 1 Cor. 16:21; Gal. 6:11; Col. 4:18; 2 Thes. 3:17; Philem. 1:19).¹⁷

Significantly, an “autobiography” of a Semitic ruler named Idrimi from Abraham’s time attributes authorship of the text to the ruler himself while at the same time overtly mentioning the name of the scribe

13. Bentley Layton, *A Coptic Grammar*, 3rd rev. ed. (Wiesbaden, Ger.: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2011), §209; Gregory E. Sterling, *Coptic Paradigms: A Summary of Sahidic Coptic Morphology* (Leuven, Belg.: Peeters, 2008), 32.

14. William K. Simpson, “The Kamose Texts,” in Simpson, *Literature of Ancient Egypt*, 349; H. S. Smith and Alexandrina Smith, “A Reconsideration of the Kamose Texts,” *Zeitschrift für Ägyptische Sprache und Altertumskunde* 103 (1976): 61.

15. Simpson, “Kamose Texts,” 349–50.

16. Wolfgang Helck, *Historisch-biographische Texte der 2. Zwischenzeit und neue Texte der 18. Dynastie* (Wiesbaden, Ger.: Harrassowitz Verlag, 1983), 94, translation ours (*gm.n=i hr=s m dd m sš m-ꜥ ḥkꜥ ḥwt-wꜥrt ꜥꜣ-wsr-Rꜥ sꜣ Rꜥ ippi ḥr nd-ḥrt nt sꜣ=i ḥkꜥ n kšī*); compare Simpson, “Kamose Texts,” 349; Smith and Smith, “Reconsideration of the Kamose Texts,” 61.

17. Lincoln H. Blumell, “Scribes and Ancient Letters: Implications for the Pauline Epistles,” in *How the New Testament Came to Be: The Thirty-fifth Annual Sidney B. Sperry Symposium*, ed. Kent P. Jackson and Frank F. Judd Jr. (Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2006), 208–26.

who physically wrote the text.¹⁸ It would not be difficult to imagine a similar situation where Abraham composed his record with the help of scribes while nevertheless claiming ownership of and responsibility for the text.

So whatever Joseph Smith and early Latter-day Saints may have assumed about how old the papyri were or who physically wrote their contents, the following conclusion can be reasonably drawn from the surviving evidence:

The heading [of the Book of Abraham] does not [necessarily] indicate that Abraham had written that particular copy but rather that he was the author of the original. . . . A text, regardless of how many copies of it exist in the world, is written by one author. However, each copy of that text is a manuscript. . . . We all know that when an author of the ancient world wrote something, if those writings were to survive or be disseminated, the text had to be copied again and again and again, for generation upon generation. When the heading states that the text was written by Abraham's own hand, it notes who the author is, not who copied down the particular manuscript that came into Joseph's possession.¹⁹

Further Reading

Nibley, Hugh. *Abraham in Egypt*, edited by Gary P. Gillum, 4–9. 2nd ed. Salt Lake City: Deseret Book; Provo, Utah: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies at Brigham Young University, 2000.

———. “As Things Stand at the Moment.” *BYU Studies* 9, no. 1 (1969): 74–78.

18. See John Gee, “Abraham and Idrimi,” *Journal of the Book of Mormon and Other Restoration Scripture* 22, no. 1 (2013): 34–39, esp. 37.

19. Kerry Muhlestein, “Egyptian Papyri and the Book of Abraham: A Faithful, Egyptological Point of View,” in *No Weapon Shall Prosper: New Light on Sensitive Issues*, ed. Robert L. Millet (Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2011), 230.

Chiasmus in the Book of Abraham

Chiasmus, or inverted parallelism, is “a two-part [literary] structure or system in which the second half is a mirror image of the first, [that is,] where the first term recurs last, and the last first.”¹ Most Latter-day Saints who know about chiasmus have probably heard about its presence in the Book of Mormon and the Bible.² Chiasmus, however, also appears in the Book of Abraham. For instance, the opening verses of the Book of Abraham contains a chiasm highlighting Abraham’s right to priesthood:

- A It was conferred upon *me*
 B from the *fathers*;
 C it came down from the *fathers*, from the *beginning of time*,
 D yea, even from the *beginning*,
 D’ or before the *foundation of the earth*,
 C’ down to the *present time*, even the right of the firstborn, or the
 first man, who is Adam, or first *father*,
 B’ through the *fathers*
A’ unto *me*. (Abr. 1:3, emphasis added)

1. John W. Welch, “Introduction,” in *Chiasmus in Antiquity*, ed. John W. Welch (Hildesheim, Ger.: Gerstenberg Verlag, 1981), 10.

2. John W. Welch, “Chiasmus in the Book of Mormon,” in *Chiasmus in Antiquity*, 198–210; John W. Welch, “The Discovery of Chiasmus in the Book of Mormon: Forty Years Later,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 16, no. 2 (2007): 74–87, 99.

Another chiasm appears in Abraham 3 that emphasizes the “selection of . . . noble ones as rulers”³ on earth:

- A Now the Lord had shown unto me, Abraham, the intelligences that were organized *before the world was*;
 B and among all these there were many of the *noble and great ones*;
 C And God saw these souls *that they were good*,
 D and he *stood in the midst* of them,
 E and he said: These I will make my rulers;
 D' for he *stood among those* that were spirits,
 C' and he saw *that they were good*;
 B' and he said unto me: Abraham, *thou art one of them*;
 A' thou wast chosen *before thou wast born*.
 (Abr. 3:22–23, emphasis added)

What makes the presence of literary parallelism in the Book of Abraham significant besides being evidence for a “tight and deliberate literary structure”⁴ of the text is that this type of literary device is “an unmistakable feature” of ancient Egyptian literature.⁵ This includes chiasmus or inverted parallelism, which has been identified in Egyptian art and architecture⁶ as well as in ancient Egyptian texts.⁷ This is seen in texts from the time of Abraham such as the Stela of Sobk-Iry, which contains a hymn to the god Osiris and features these lines:⁸

3. Julie M. Smith, “A Note on Chiasmus in Abraham 3:22–23,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 8 (2014): 189.

4. Smith, “Note on Chiasmus in Abraham 3:22–23,” 189.

5. Jacqueline E. Jay, *Orality and Literacy in the Demotic Tales*, Culture and History of the Ancient Near East 81 (Leiden, Neth.: Brill, 2016), 91–96, quote at 93.

6. Christian E. Loeben, “Symmetrie, Diagonale und Chiasmus als Dekorprinzipien im Bildprogramm des Großen Tempels von Abu Simbel,” in *3. Ägyptologische Tempeltagung, Hamburg, 1.–5. Juni 1994: Systeme und Programme der ägyptischen Tempeldekoration*, ed. Dieter Kurth (Wiesbaden, Ger.: Harrassowitz Verlag, 1995), 143–62.

7. Jay, *Orality and Literacy in the Demotic Tales*, 29–30; Robert F. Smith, “Chiasmus in Ancient Egyptian and in the So-Called ‘Anthon Transcript,’” unpublished paper, in authors’ possession.

8. For translation and discussion of the chiastic structure of this passage, see Miriam Lichtheim, *Ancient Egyptian Literature, Volume I: The Old and Middle Kingdoms* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973), 202–3.

- A “Whose awe Atum set [*kmꜣ*] in the heart of men, gods, spirits, and dead,
 B Whom rulership was *given* [*rdi*] in On;
 C *Great* [*ꜥꜣ*] of presence in Djedu,
 D *Lord* [*nb*] of fear in Two-Mounds;
 E *Great* [*ꜥꜣ*] of terror in Rostau,
 F *Lord* [*nb*] of awe in Hnes.
 F' *Lord* [*nb*] of power in Tenent,
 E' *Great* [*ꜥꜣ*] of love upon earth;
 D' *Lord* [*nb*] of fame in the palace,
 C' *Great* [*ꜥꜣ*] of glory in Abydos;
 B' Whom triumph was *given* [*rdi*] before the assembled Nine Gods,
 A' For whom slaughter was *made* [*kmꜣ*] in Herwer's great hall.”

Additional texts from Abraham's time known today as the Story of Sinuhe and the Story of the Shipwrecked Sailor both contain a macro-chiasm that structures the overall narrative as an inverted parallelism.⁹

The Story of Sinuhe¹⁰

- A Sinuhe's Flight from Egypt
 B Sinuhe's Conversation with King Amunenshi
 C Sinuhe's Life and Adventures in Syria
 B' Sinuhe's Correspondence with King Senwosret I
 A' Sinuhe's Return to Egypt

9. See the comments on the “internal symmetry” of Sinuhe's “tightly structured” narrative in Richard Parkinson, *The Tale of Sinuhe and Other Ancient Egyptian Poems, 1940–1640 BC* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 11, 21–26; as well as the comment about the “internally cyclical forms” (that is, chiasmus) of these texts in John Baines, “Interpreting the Story of the Shipwrecked Sailor,” *Journal of Egyptian Archaeology* 76 (1990): 67.

10. Modified from Smith, “Chiasmus in Ancient Egyptian and in the So-Called ‘Anthon Transcript,’” 8.

The Story of the Shipwrecked Sailor¹¹

- A Framing Device: The *šmsw* and Leader
 - B Narrator's Departure
 - C Life on the Island
 - D Central Narrative of the Snake
 - C' Life on the Island
 - B' Narrator's Return
- A' Framing Device: The *šmsw* and Leader

Since Abraham was not writing Egyptian literature for an Egyptian audience, the significance of ancient Egyptian texts and the Book of Abraham sharing common literary features like chiasmus and parallelism is noteworthy but should not be overstated. It seems that since Abraham was probably writing to those of his Semitic culture,¹² the presence of chiasmus in the Book of Abraham demonstrates the prevalence of this literary feature in the ancient world generally, including Abraham's own culture, and can be viewed as a marker of the text's ancient origin. The presence of chiasmus in the Book of Abraham is therefore consistent with expectations that the text bears a high degree of historicity and reinforces both its overall credibility and literary quality.

Further Reading

Smith, Julie M. "A Note on Chiasmus in Abraham 3:22–23." *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 8 (2014): 187–90.

11. See Baines, "Interpreting the Story of the Shipwrecked Sailor," 67.

12. Eric Jay Olson, "I Have a Question," *Ensign* 12, no. 6 (June 1982): 35–36.

Egyptianisms in the Book of Abraham

One way of determining whether the Book of Abraham is a translation of an underlying Egyptian document or whether it was originally composed in English is to see if the text contains what might be called Egyptianisms, or literary and linguistic features of the Egyptian language. The presence of Egyptianisms in the text of the Book of Abraham “might indicate some knowledge of Egyptian on Joseph Smith’s part.”¹ Because “Egyptian was not really understood in Joseph Smith’s day,”² any knowledge of Egyptian Joseph Smith may have possessed could only have come by revelation.

A careful reading of the Book of Abraham does reveal some potential Egyptianisms in the English text. For example, “the earliest manuscript containing Abraham 1:17 reads ‘and this because ~~their hearts are turned~~ they have turned their hearts away from me.’ The phrase ‘their hearts are turned’ was crossed out and ‘they have turned their hearts’ was written immediately afterwards. In Egyptian of the time period of the Joseph Smith Papyri the passive is expressed by the use of a third person plural. So the two phrases would be identical in Egyptian. The translator has to decide which way to render the passage.”³

Paronomasia, or wordplay, is another attested feature of ancient Egyptian literature that also appears in the Book of Abraham.⁴ In

1. John Gee, “Joseph Smith and Ancient Egypt,” in *Approaching Antiquity: Joseph Smith and the Ancient World*, ed. Lincoln H. Blumell, Matthew J. Grey, and Andrew H. Hedges (Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2015), 442.

2. Gee, “Joseph Smith and Ancient Egypt,” 443.

3. Gee, “Joseph Smith and Ancient Egypt,” 442.

4. See Siegfried Morenz, “Wortspiele in Ägypten,” in *Festschrift Johannes Jahn zum 22. November 1957* (Leipzig, Ger.: E. A. Seemann Verlag, 1957), 23–32; Antonio Loprieno, “Puns and Word Play in Ancient Egyptian,” in *Puns and Pundits: Word Play in the Hebrew*

Abraham 3, the Lord showed Abraham a panoramic view of the cosmos and then a vision of the spirits in the premortal council in heaven. Half-way through this vision, the Lord shifts from discussing the gradation and hierarchy of heavenly bodies to discussing the gradation and hierarchy of spiritual beings:

Now, if there be two things, one above the other, and the moon be above the earth, then it may be that a *planet* or a *star* may exist above it; and there is nothing that the Lord thy God shall take in his heart to do but what he will do it. Howbeit that he made the greater *star*; as, also, if there be two *spirits*, and one shall be more intelligent than the other, yet these two *spirits*, notwithstanding one is more intelligent than the other, have no beginning; they existed before, they shall have no end, they shall exist after, for they are gnolaum, or eternal. (Abr. 3:17–18, emphasis added)

This shift plausibly appears to pivot on a play on words in Egyptian. The Egyptian word for “spirit” (*ꜥḥ*) resembles the word for the “light and brilliance” (*iꜥḥ*) of celestial bodies, including stars, as well as the word for the circumpolar stars (*iḥm*), which were identified with the spirit of the deceased king in texts predating Abraham.⁵ The Book of Abraham’s conceptual linkage of souls or spirits with heavenly bodies such as stars works particularly well from an Egyptian perspective, since “the stars could additionally be identified with the *akhs* [spirits] of the deceased by virtue of these latter’s connection with the light and brilliance (*iꜥḥ*) typical of celestial bodies.”⁶ This means that from an Egyptian perspective the astronomical teachings of the Book of Abraham “flow seamlessly into teachings about the preexistence which follow immediately thereafter.”⁷

Bible and Ancient Near Eastern Literature, ed. Scott B. Noegel (Bethesda, Md.: CDL Press, 2000), 3–20; Penelope Wilson, *Hieroglyphs: A Very Short Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 62–69; and Barbara A. Richter, *The Theology of Hathor of Dendera: Aural and Visual Scribal Techniques in the Per-Wer Sanctuary* (Atlanta: Lockwood Press, 2016), 13–19.

5. Silvia Zago, “Classifying the Duat: Tracing the Conceptualization of the Afterlife between Pyramid Texts and Coffin Texts,” *Zeitschrift für Ägyptische Sprache und Altertumskunde* 145, no. 2 (2018): 212; Scott B. Noegel, “Wordplay” in *Ancient Near Eastern Texts* (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2021), 167.

6. Zago, “Classifying the Duat,” 212; compare Erik Hornung, *Conceptions of God in Ancient Egypt: The One and the Many*, trans. John Baines (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1982), 80–81.

7. John Gee, *An Introduction to the Book of Abraham* (Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2017), 117, 119.

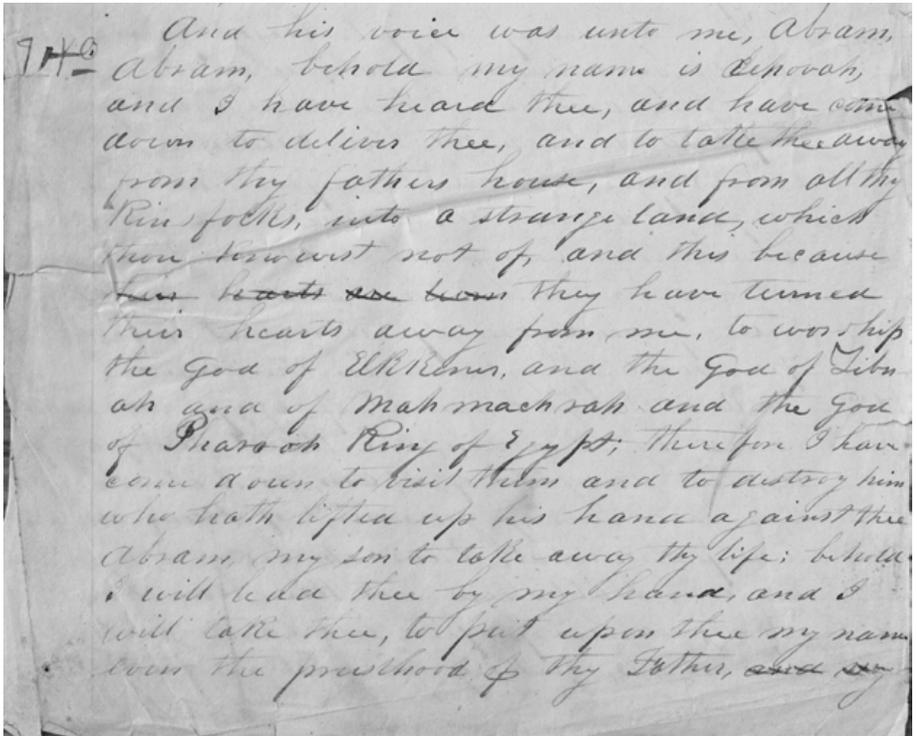


FIGURE 25. “Book of Abraham Manuscript, circa July–circa November 1835–B,” 3. © Intellectual Reserve, Inc. Courtesy Church History Library, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Lines 7–9 in the second full paragraph read, “And this because their harts are turn they have turned their hearts away from me.”

The question remains whether Abraham himself was responsible for these Egyptianisms or whether they were the result of later scribes and copyists. Abraham appears to have been writing to a non-Egyptian audience (presumably his own kinsfolk or descendants), and it is currently unknown what language he originally spoke.⁸ While Abraham taught the relationship between stars and spirits to the Egyptians, and their own language and literary culture would have supported paronomasia, it is possible that these Egyptianisms were introduced in the later copy of Abraham’s writings that was preserved on the papyri acquired by Joseph Smith. This, in turn, could potentially explain how Egyptianisms appear in a text written for Abraham’s Hebrew posterity.

8. Eric Jay Olson, “I Have a Question,” *Ensign* 12, no. 6 (June 1982): 35–36.

While these Egyptianisms in the Book of Abraham do not indisputably prove that Joseph Smith was translating from ancient Egyptian, they are consistent with his claims to have done so.

Further Reading

Gee, John. "Joseph Smith and Ancient Egypt." In *Approaching Antiquity: Joseph Smith and the Ancient World*, edited by Lincoln H. Blumell, Matthew J. Grey, and Andrew H. Hedges, 427–48. Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2015.

Jews in Ancient Egypt

The Egyptian papyri acquired by Joseph Smith in 1835 can be confidently dated to many centuries after Abraham's lifetime. Based on several factors, it can be determined that the papyri were written in a period when Egypt was governed by a dynasty of Greek rulers who reigned from circa 300 to 30 BC.¹ A question that readers of the Book of Abraham might have is how a late copy of Abraham's record originally written sometime around 2,000–1,800 BC could have ended up in the possession of an ancient Egyptian living many centuries later.

One plausible scenario is that Abraham's descendants (ancient Israelites) transmitted the text over the centuries by copying it through succeeding generations in the same way that the books of the Bible were written and copied over many centuries. But the Book of Abraham as translated by Joseph Smith is said to have been preserved on Egyptian papyri recovered "from the catacombs of Egypt" (Book of Abraham heading). If Abraham's descendants transmitted his record, how did it end up in Egypt?

In fact, there is ample evidence that groups of ancient Israelites and other Semitic peoples migrated into Egypt over the course of many centuries, taking with them their culture, religious practices, and sacred texts.² "Abraham himself was in Egypt, as was his great-grandson Joseph

1. Marc Coenen, "The Dating of the Papyri Joseph Smith I, X and XI and Min Who Massacres His Enemies," in *Egyptian Religion: The Last Thousand Years, Part I: Studies Dedicated to the Memory of Jan Quaegebeur*, ed. Willy Clarysse, Antoon Schoors, and Harco Willems (Leuven, Belg.: Peeters, 1998), 1103–15; Michael D. Rhodes, *The Hor Book of Breathings: A Translation and Commentary* (Provo, Utah: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 2002), 3.

2. Joseph M. Modrzejewski, *The Jews of Egypt: From Rameses II to Emperor Hadrian* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1995); Alison Salvesen, Sarah Pearce, and

and all of his Israelite descendants for hundreds of years thereafter. After the Exodus, Israelites continued to travel to and live in Egypt. After the Babylonian destruction of Jerusalem, large groups of Jews settled in Egypt and created longstanding and thriving communities.”³

One of these migrations occurred during the time of the prophet Jeremiah. The Bible records “Judeans living in the land of Egypt, at Migdol, at Tahpanhes, at Memphis, and in the land of Pathros” during this time (Jer. 44:1, NRSV). These Jews had evidently fled into Egypt at the time of the Babylonian conquest of the kingdom of Judah.⁴

Around this time a group of Jewish mercenaries traveled as far south as the island of Elephantine on the Nile and not only established a thriving community but also built a temple to Yahweh (or Jehovah), the God of Israel.⁵ They made copies of biblical texts that have survived today, attesting to the existence of a thriving literary and religious culture in their community.⁶

During the Greco-Roman period of Egyptian history (ca. 330 BC–AD 400), ancient Jews built communities in many parts of Egypt. The city of Alexandria on the coast of the Mediterranean was home to a sizable Jewish community. Other Egyptian sites such as Leontopolis,

Miriam Frenkel, eds., *Israel in Egypt: The Land of Egypt as Concept and Reality for Jews in Antiquity and the Early Medieval Period* (Leiden, Neth.: Brill, 2020).

3. Kerry Muhlestein, “Egyptian Papyri and the Book of Abraham: A Faithful, Egyptological Point of View,” in *No Weapon Shall Prosper: New Light on Sensitive Issues*, ed. Robert L. Millet (Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2011), 230–31.

4. Jan K. Winnicki, *Late Egypt and Her Neighbors: Foreign Population in Egypt in the First Millennium BC* (Warsaw: Warsaw University, 2009), 180–81.

5. John Merlin Powis Smith, “The Jewish Temple at Elephantine,” *Biblical World* 31, no. 6 (June 1908): 448–59; Bezalel Porten, “The Structure and Orientation of the Jewish Temple at Elephantine: A Revised Plan of the Jewish District,” *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 81, no. 1 (January–March 1961): 38–42; Modrzejewski, *Jews of Egypt*, 21–44; Lisbeth S. Fried, *The Priest and the Great King: Temple-Palace Relations in the Persian Empire*, *Biblical and Judaic Studies* 10 (Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 2004), 92–107; Stephen G. Rosenberg, “The Jewish Temple at Elephantine,” *Near Eastern Archaeology* 67, no. 1 (March 2004): 4–13.

6. Charles F. Nims and Richard C. Steiner, “A Paganized Version of Psalm 20:2–6 from the Aramaic Text in Demotic Script,” *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 103, no. 1 (January–March 1983): 261–74; Karel van der Toorn, “Three Israelite Psalms in an Ancient Egyptian Papyrus,” *Ancient Near East Today* 6, no. 5 (May 2018), <https://www.asor.org/anetoday/2018/05/Three-Israelite-Psalms-Ancient-Egypt>; Karel van der Toorn, *Becoming Diaspora Jews: Behind the Story of Elephantine* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2019), 149–87.

Oxyrynchus, Thebes, and locations in the Fayum likewise had a Jewish presence. In fact, ancient sources indicate that another temple to Yahweh was built at Leontopolis.⁷ Synagogues were likewise built at Alexandria and at sites in the Fayum.⁸

Evidence from surviving textual sources confirms that Jewish names (including names such as Solomon, Aaron, Abraham, and Samuel) proliferated throughout Egypt. Summarizing this evidence, one scholar wrote how “besides the Greeks, Jews were the most numerous group of foreigners living in Egypt” during this time.⁹

There is also clear evidence that these Egyptian Jews copied their sacred texts and even composed new texts while they lived in Egypt. The Old Testament was translated into Greek in Alexandria during this time, and stories about Abraham and other biblical figures circulated among Jews living both inside and outside of Egypt.¹⁰ As has been noted, “the Jews who had been coming into Egypt brought with them their oral and written stories. Esteem for Abraham and stories about him were part of Jewish identity and culture, regardless of where they lived, but it was perhaps especially prominent in Egypt, where Abraham himself had spent some time.”¹¹

So even though Abraham would have written his record many centuries earlier, there is plenty of historical evidence to suggest a plausible way in which those writings could have been transmitted into Egypt at any point over the course of many centuries.

7. M. Delcor and R. de Vaux, “Le Temple D’Onias en Égypte,” *Revue Biblique* 75, no. 2 (April 1968): 188–205; Robert Hayward, “The Jewish Temple at Leontopolis: A Reconsideration,” *Journal of Jewish Studies* 33, nos. 1–2 (Spring–Autumn 1982): 429–43.

8. Judith McKenzie, *The Architecture of Alexandria and Egypt, 300 BC–AD 700* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), 66, 180–82; Kerry Muhlestein and Courtney Innes, “Synagogues and Cemeteries: Evidence for a Jewish Presence in the Fayum,” *Journal of Ancient Egyptian Interconnections* 4, no. 2 (2012): 53–59.

9. Winnicki, *Late Egypt and Her Neighbors*, 182.

10. Taylor Halverson, “The Lives of Abraham: Seeing Abraham through the Eyes of Second-Temple Jews,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 32 (2019): 253–76; R. Rubinkiewicz, “Apocalypse of Abraham,” in *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, ed. James H. Charlesworth, 2 vols. (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson Publishers, 1983), 1:681–705; E. P. Sanders, “Testament of Abraham,” in Charlesworth, *Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, 1:871–902; Dale C. Allison, *The Testament of Abraham* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2003).

11. Kerry Muhlestein, *Let’s Talk about the Book of Abraham* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2022), 15.

Further Reading

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Smoot, Stephen O., and Kerry Muhlestein. "Prophets, Pagans, and Papyri: The Jews of Greco-Roman Egypt and the Transmission of the Book of Abraham." *BYU Studies Quarterly* 61, no. 2 (2022): 105–34.

Abrahamic Legends and Lore

As a central figure in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, there are many extrabiblical traditions about the life of the patriarch Abraham. These sources are important to study because they may contain distant memories of real events in Abraham's life. It is also interesting to compare the Book of Abraham with these sources because the Book of Abraham might help us understand these extrabiblical sources better and vice versa.

Much of the Book of Abraham's content that does not appear in the Genesis account parallels the extrabiblical material from these religious traditions.¹ Just some of the unique elements in the Book of Abraham that are found in ancient and medieval Jewish, Christian, and Islamic sources include idolatry in Abraham's day, a famine in the land of the

1. Hugh Nibley provided pioneering work on this subject. See Hugh Nibley, *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 University, 2000), 11–42; and 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, 2010), 375–468. More recently, John A. Tvedtnes, Brian M. Hauglid, and John Gee have collected and synthesized a large (though not exhaustive) number of these sources. See John A. Tvedtnes, Brian M. Hauglid, and John Gee, eds., *Traditions about the Early Life of Abraham* (Provo, Utah: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 2001). See also Bradley J. Cook, “The *Book of Abraham* and the Islamic *Qiṣaṣ al-Anbiyā'* (Tales of the Prophets) Extant Literature,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 33, no. 4 (Winter 2000): 127–46; Brian M. Hauglid, “On the Early Life of Abraham: Biblical and Qur'anic Intertextuality and the Anticipation of Muhammad,” in *Bible and Qur'an: Essays in Scriptural Intertextuality*, ed. John C. Reeves (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2003), 87–105; and Brian M. Hauglid, “The Book of Abraham and Muslim Tradition,” in *Astronomy, Papyrus, and Covenant*, comp. and ed. John Gee and Brian M. Hauglid, *Studies in the Book of Abraham* 3 (Provo, Utah: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 2005), 131–46.

Chaldeans, an attempt to sacrifice Abraham, Abraham receiving a vision of God and the cosmos, and Abraham being knowledgeable about astronomy and teaching such to the Egyptians.²

For example, an early Christian author named Eusebius preserved an account of Abraham teaching the Egyptians astronomy: “Abraham lived in Heliopolis with the Egyptian priests and taught them much: He explained astrology and the other sciences to them, saying that the Babylonians and he himself had obtained this knowledge.”³ The ancient Jewish historian Josephus likewise recorded that Abraham taught the Egyptians astronomy: “He communicated to them arithmetic, and delivered to them the science of astronomy; for, before Abram came into Egypt, they were unacquainted with those parts of learning.”⁴ To be sure, mathematics and astronomy were well-developed in Egypt by the time Abraham arrived for his brief sojourn in that land. These reports by early Jewish and Christian writers that depict Abraham as being the first one to introduce these sciences into Egypt should not be taken at face value as factual historical reports. However, they are worth highlighting in this context since their overall depiction of Abraham as a learned astronomer parallels the Book of Abraham’s account in some rather interesting ways. It should also be kept in mind that the Book of Abraham does not actually claim that Abraham was the first to teach the Egyptians astronomy. Facsimile 3 of the Book of Abraham is said to depict Abraham merely “reasoning” upon the principles of astronomy in the king’s court, not introducing them for the first time.

Another recurring theme in these ancient extrabiblical accounts about Abraham is his having a vision of the cosmos and being brought into the presence of God.⁵ Medieval Jewish sources also speak of Abraham having in his possession a “glowing precious stone” with which he read the stars and performed miracles:

Abraham wore a glowing stone around his neck. Some say that it was a pearl, others that it was a jewel. The light emitted by that jewel was like

2. Tvedtnes, Hauglid, and Gee, *Traditions about the Early Life of Abraham*, 537–47.

3. Tvedtnes, Hauglid, and Gee, *Traditions about the Early Life of Abraham*, 8–9. The ancients tended to conflate the practices of “astrology” (studying the stars in an attempt to detect their supposed influence on mortal lives and affairs) and “astronomy” (the scientific study of celestial objects and their movements) and viewed them as overlapping endeavors. For this reason, the terms “astrology” and “astronomy” are often used interchangeably both in ancient sources and by modern scholars and translators working with these sources. The modern bifurcation of these two practices (which also widely regards the former as a pseudoscience) was not so neatly delineated by the ancients.

4. Tvedtnes, Hauglid, and Gee, *Traditions about the Early Life of Abraham*, 49.

5. Jared W. Ludlow, “Abraham’s Visions of the Heavens,” in Gee and Hauglid, *Astronomy, Papyrus, and Covenant*, 57–73.

the light of the sun, illuminating the entire world. Abraham used that stone as an astrolabe to study the motion of the stars, and with its help he became a master astrologer. For his power of reading the stars, Abraham was much sought after by the potentates of East and West. So too did that glowing precious stone bring immediate healing to any sick person who looked into it. At the moment when Abraham took leave of this world, the precious stone raised itself and flew up to heaven. God took it and hung it on the wheel of the sun.⁶

With a few exceptions, the extrabiblical sources that parallel the account in the Book of Abraham were unavailable to Joseph Smith. Even with those sources that could have been available to him, such as the writings of Josephus, it is not clear how much exposure or access Joseph Smith had to them or how much they influenced his thinking.⁷ “Josephus was known to Oliver Cowdery and theoretically known to Joseph Smith, but it is not clear that Joseph Smith actually read much, if anything, out of Josephus before he translated the Book of Abraham. While some elements of the Book of Abraham agree with Josephus, there are important disagreements as well.”⁸ For instance, unlike Josephus, the Book of Abraham does not depict the patriarch as introducing mathematics or arithmetic to the Egyptians. It also specifically says Abraham reasoned with the king and his court on astronomical matters, something also missing from Josephus. “In this respect, the Book of Abraham account is actually closer to an account given by Artapanus, an ancient Jewish author who lived in Egypt sometime before the first century BCE, since he specifically reported that Abram taught Pharaoh astronomy.”⁹

It is also important to keep in mind that these later sources do not necessarily always reflect an accurate history of Abraham. “Not all [ancient]

6. Howard Schwartz, *Tree of Souls: The Mythology of Judaism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 332, citing *b. Bava Batra* 16b; *Zohar* 1:11a–11b, *Idra Rabbah*. As Schwartz comments, “this talmudic legend about a glowing stone that Abraham wore around his neck is a part of the chain of legends about that glowing jewel, known as the *Tzohar*, which was first given to Adam and Eve when they were expelled from the Garden of Eden and also came into the possession of Noah, who hung it in the ark. . . . This version of the legend adds the detail that the glowing stone was also an astrolabe, with which Abraham could study the stars.”

7. Lincoln H. Blumell, “Palmyra and Jerusalem: Joseph Smith’s Scriptural Texts and the Writings of Flavius Josephus,” in *Approaching Antiquity: Joseph Smith and the Ancient World*, ed. Lincoln H. Blumell, Matthew J. Grey, and Andrew H. Hedges (Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2015), 356–406, esp. 371–73.

8. John Gee, *An Introduction to the Book of Abraham* (Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2017), 159.

9. Blumell, “Palmyra and Jerusalem,” 372.

authors treated their sources the same way. Some authors retold the tales they read in their own words, adding more vivid and imaginative details. Other authors repeated their sources word for word. Some authors expanded their stories, while others abbreviated them, and still others left them unchanged. This makes it difficult to come up with a general theory [for their reliability] that covers all cases.”¹⁰ What is important for the Book of Abraham is not that these sources somehow *prove* the book is true. Rather, they demonstrate that important themes and narrative details in the Book of Abraham fit comfortably in the ancient world and do not always fit comfortably in Joseph Smith’s nineteenth-century environment.¹¹ “The nonbiblical traditions about Abraham underscore the pervasive influence this great patriarch has had on ancient and modern peoples. Because the Book of Abraham parallels so many nonbiblical stories, it is clearly part of the same tradition.”¹²

While they perhaps do not rise to the level of *proof*, these parallels are still evidence for the Book of Abraham because “it is difficult to argue that Joseph Smith wrote the Book of Abraham using [these] Abrahamic stories because most of them were not available to him, and those that were often contained details that do not match the Book of Abraham. On the other hand, the ancient existence of a Book of Abraham can explain why these stories existed.”¹³

Further Reading

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- Nibley, Hugh. *An Approach to the Book of Abraham*, edited by John Gee, 375–468. 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.
- Tvedtnes, John A., Brian M. Hauglid, and John Gee, eds. *Traditions about the Early Life of Abraham*. Provo, Utah: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 2001.

10. Gee, *Introduction to the Book of Abraham*, 158.

11. See the discussion in Andrew W. Hedges, “A Wanderer in a Strange Land: Abraham in America, 1800–1850,” in Gee and Hauglid, *Astronomy, Papyrus, and Covenant*, 175–87.

12. Tvedtnes, Hauglid, and Gee, *Traditions about the Early Life of Abraham*, xxxv.

13. Gee, *Introduction to the Book of Abraham*, 160.

The Ancient Egyptian View of Abraham

Some might ask how likely it would have been for the ancient Egyptians to have known anything about the biblical figure Abraham. In fact, evidence survives today indicating that stories about Abraham were known to the ancient Egyptians as early as the time of the composition of the Joseph Smith Papyri (ca. 330–30 BC).

The earliest documented appearance of the biblical story of Abraham in ancient Egypt dates to the third century BC. It was at this time when the Old Testament (or Hebrew Bible) was translated into Greek in the Egyptian city of Alexandria. This translation is commonly called the Septuagint.¹ In addition to the biblical text, extrabiblical stories about Abraham circulated in Egypt during this time. For example,

- “during the reign of Ptolemy I, Hecateus of Abdera traveled to Thebes and learned stories about Abraham from Egyptian priests; he wrote these stories in a book called *On Abraham and the Egyptians*. This work is now unfortunately lost, but Clement of Alexandria, a second-century AD Egyptian Christian, quoted a short passage from it in which the worship of idols is condemned.”²

1. Karen H. Jobes and Moisés Silvia, *Invitation to the Septuagint* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2000); Albert Pietersma and Benjamin G. Wright, eds., *A New English Translation of the Septuagint and the Other Greek Translations Traditionally Included under That Title* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007).

2. John Gee, *An Introduction to the Book of Abraham* (Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2017), 51; compare Clement, *Stromata* 5.14. The authorship of this source is disputed among modern scholars, with some insisting the texts attributed to Hecataeus are pseudepigraphical. For a discussion, see Bezalel Bar-Kochva, *The Image of the Jews in Greek Literature: The Hellenistic Period* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010), 90–135.

- “The writer Eupolemus, who lived under Egyptian rule in Palestine in the second century BC, recounts how Abraham lived in Heliopolis (On) and taught astronomy and other sciences to the Egyptian priests. In connection with Abraham, Eupolemus seems to think that the Egyptians descended from Canaan.”³
- “In the first century BC, the Egyptian Jew Artapanus wrote an account of Abraham teaching astronomy to the Egyptian Pharaoh.”⁴
- “Philo, a first-century AD Egyptian Jew, claimed that Abraham studied astronomy, the motion of the stars, meteorology, and mathematics, and used his reasoning on these subjects to understand God.”⁵
- “The *Testament of Abraham* describes Abraham’s tour of the next life before he dies. Scholars think that this work was written by an Egyptian Jew around the first century AD. It is notable for its reinterpretation of the Egyptian judgment scene in a Jewish fashion. This text was read liturgically the Sunday before Christmas during the Egyptian month of Khoiak.”⁶
- “[A] fragmentary text from Egypt about Abraham describes how the king (the word used is *pharaoh*) tries to sacrifice Abraham, but Abraham is delivered by an angel of the Lord. Abraham later teaches the members of the royal court about the true God using astronomy.”⁷

3. Gee, *Introduction to the Book of Abraham*, 51; compare R. Doran, “Pseudo-Eupolemus,” in *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, ed. James H. Charlesworth, 2 vols. (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1983), 2:881. As with the works attributed to Hecateus, the authorship of the texts attributed to Eupolemus remains disputed. See Ben Zion Wacholder, “Pseudo-Eupolemus’ Two Greek Fragments on the Life of Abraham,” *Hebrew Union College Annual* 34 (1963): 83–113. Regardless of these texts’ true authorship, they nevertheless do preserve accounts about Abraham circulating in ancient Egypt (and the broader ancient Jewish world) that parallel the Book of Abraham.

4. Gee, *Introduction to the Book of Abraham*, 51; J. J. Collins, “Artapanus,” in Charlesworth, *Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, 2:897.

5. Gee, *Introduction to the Book of Abraham*, 51; compare “On Abraham,” in *The Works of Philo: Complete and Unabridged*, trans. C. D. Yonge (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson Publishers, 1993), 417.

6. Gee, *Introduction to the Book of Abraham*, 51; compare Dale C. Allison, *Testament of Abraham* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2003); and Jared Ludlow, “Appropriation of Egyptian Judgment in the Testament of Abraham?,” in *Evolving Egypt: Innovation, Appropriation, and Reinterpretation in Ancient Egypt*, ed. Kerry Muhlestein (Oxford: Archaeopress, 2012), 99–103.

7. Gee, *Introduction to the Book of Abraham*, 52, emphasis in original; compare the Coptic homily translated and discussed in John Gee, “An Egyptian View of Abraham,” in *Bountiful Harvest: Essays in Honor of S. Kent Brown*, ed. Andrew C. Skinner, D. Morgan Davis, and Carl Griffin (Provo, Utah: Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship,

An additional significant body of evidence for the Egyptian view of Abraham comes from a collection of texts commonly called the Greek Magical Papyri or the Theban Magical Library. This corpus of texts from the ancient Egyptian city of Thebes preserves “a variety of magical spells and formulae, hymns and rituals. The extant texts are mainly from the second century B.C. to the fifth century A.D.”⁸ Significantly, many biblical names and figures are used in these texts alongside Egyptian and Greek names and figures.⁹ The name for this common ancient phenomenon is syncretism, where elements of different religions or traditions were harmonized together into a new “synthetic” religious paradigm. In some important ways, the form of religion widely practiced by the Egyptians during the time of the Joseph Smith Papyri was a highly syncretic one.

Why were biblical figures syncretized with Egyptian religious or magical practices? We cannot know entirely for sure, but one very plausible reason is that “Israelite religious beliefs and stories had a number of things to offer the Egyptians. . . . Israelite religion could offer the Egyptians stories associated with sanctity and sacred space, amulets, angels, a personal relationship with deity, and a god who acted in history.”¹⁰ Whatever the exact reason might be,

a noncomprehensive list of nondivine names [in these texts] includes Abimelech, Abraham, Adam, Ammon, Aziel, Dardanos, David, Emmanuel, Gabriel, Gomorrah, Isaac, Israel, Jacob, Jeremiah, Jerusalem, Judah, Lot, Lot’s wife, Michael, Moses, Solomon, and even Osiris-Michael. Names for the Israelite deity include Adonai, Adonai Sabaoth (as well as just Sabaoth, which is more common), Elohim, El, God of the Hebrews, Yaho (the abbreviated version of Jehovah that was often employed by Jews in Egypt), and blessed Lord God of Abraham, along with many variations and combinations of these names and titles that undoubtedly refer

2011), 137–56. Additional extrabiblical texts and traditions about Abraham can be accessed in John A. Tvedtnes, Brian M. Hauglid, and John Gee, eds., *Traditions about the Early Life of Abraham* (Provo, Utah: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 2001).

8. Hans Dieter Betz, “Introduction to the Greek Magical Papyri,” in *The Greek Magical Papyri in Translation*, ed. Hans Dieter Betz (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), xli.

9. Kerry Muhlestein, “Abraham, Isaac, and Osiris-Michael: The Use of Biblical Figures in Egyptian Religion, a Survey,” in *Achievements and Problems of Modern Egyptology: Proceedings of the International Conference Held in Moscow on September 29–October 2, 2009*, ed. Galina A. Belova (Moscow: Russian Academy of Sciences, 2012), 246–59.

10. Kerry Muhlestein, “The Religious and Cultural Background of Joseph Smith Papyrus I,” *Journal of the Book of Mormon and Other Restoration Scripture* 22, no. 1 (2013): 26.

to the Hebrew God, such as “He who drew back the Jordan River,” or referencing the God who drove the winds at the Red Sea and met someone at the foot of the Holy Mount to reveal his great name.¹¹

Abraham and Moses were two popular figures used by these Egyptian priests in their magical practices.¹² They were so popular, in fact, that an early Egyptian Christian writer named Origen even voiced his outrage that his pagan neighbors were invoking “the God of Abraham” without properly knowing who Abraham really was.¹³

From the evidence of the Greek Magical Papyri, we can conclude that “a group of priests from Thebes possessed, read, understood, and employed biblical and extrabiblical texts, most especially texts about Abraham and Moses.”¹⁴ This evidence, along with the other evidence for a knowledge of Abraham circulating in ancient Egypt, bolsters confidence in the Book of Abraham’s authenticity by providing it with a plausible ancient Egyptian historical and literary context.¹⁵

Further Reading

- Gee, John. “The Egyptian View of Abraham.” In *An Introduction to the Book of Abraham*, 49–55. Salt Lake City: Deseret Book; Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 2017.
- Muhlestein, Kerry. “Abraham, Isaac, and Osiris-Michael: The Use of Biblical Figures in Egyptian Religion.” In *Achievements and Problems of Modern Egyptology*, edited by Galina A. Belova, 246–59. Moscow: Russian Academy of Sciences, 2012.
- . “The Religious and Cultural Background of Joseph Smith Papyrus I.” *Journal of the Book of Mormon and Other Restoration Scripture* 22, no. 1 (2013): 20–33.

11. Muhlestein, “Religious and Cultural Background of Joseph Smith Papyrus I,” 23.

12. Spells from this corpus that invoke Abraham (or Abraam) can be read in Betz, *Greek Magical Papyri in Translation*, 8, 125, 164, 171, 191, 194, 262, 276, 300, 310.

13. Muhlestein, “Religious and Cultural Background of Joseph Smith Papyrus I,” 26, citing Origen, *Contra Celsum* 1.22. The spells Origen may have had in mind include one for “driving out demons” that includes the line “Hail, God of Abraham; hail, God of Isaac; hail, God of Jacob” (Papyrus Graecae Magicae [PGM] IV.1235, in Betz, *Greek Magical Papyri in Translation*, 62); or one that reads, “I conjure you all by the god of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, that you obey my authority completely” (PGM XXXV.15, in Betz, *Greek Magical Papyri in Translation*, 268).

14. Muhlestein, “Religious and Cultural Background of Joseph Smith Papyrus I,” 30.

15. See the extensive discussion in John Gee, “Abracadabra, Isaac and Jacob,” *FARMS Review of Books on the Book of Mormon* 7, no. 1 (1995): 19–84.

The Ancient Owners of the Joseph Smith Papyri

Thanks to the work of Egyptologists over the past decades, in addition to knowing what texts the extant Egyptian papyri acquired by Joseph Smith in 1835 contain,¹ we also know quite a bit about the ancient owners of the papyri. Because Joseph Smith incorporated Facsimiles 1 and 3 of the Book of Abraham from vignettes or illustrations contained on a papyrus now designated P. Joseph Smith I, XI–X, the identity of the ancient owner of this papyrus may prove especially interesting. “From the names, titles, and genealogies written on the Joseph Smith Papyri, we know” the owner of this papyrus was a man named Hor (or Horos in Greek).² Hor lived during “about the same time period as the Rosetta

1. Hugh W. Nibley, *The Message of the Joseph Smith Papyri: An Egyptian Endowment*, 2nd ed., ed. John Gee and Michael D. Rhodes, Collected Works of Hugh Nibley 16 (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book; Provo, Utah: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 2005); Michael D. Rhodes, *The Hor Book of Breathings: A Translation and Commentary* (Provo, Utah: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 2002); Michael D. Rhodes, *Books of the Dead Belonging to Tshemmin and Neferirnub: A Translation and Commentary* (Provo, Utah: Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, 2010).

2. John Gee, *An Introduction to the Book of Abraham* (Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2017), 58; compare Marc Coenen, “The Dating of the Papyri Joseph Smith I, X, and XI and Min Who Massacres His Enemies,” in *Egyptian Religion: The Last Thousand Years, Part I: Studies Dedicated to the Memory of Jan Quaegebeur*, ed. Willy Clarysse, Antoon Schoors, and Harco Willems (Leuven, Belg.: Peeters, 1998), 1103–15; Marc Coenen, “Horos, Prophet of Min Who Massacres His Enemies,” *Chronique D’Égypte* 74 (1999): 257–260; John Gee, “History of a Theban Priesthood,” in «*Et Maintenant Ce Ne Sont Plus Que Des Villages . . .*» *Thèbes et Sa Région aux Époques Hellénistique, Romaine et Byzantine, Actes du Colloque Tenu À Bruxelles les 2 et 3 Décembre 2005*, ed. Alain Delattre and Paul Heilporn (Bruxelles: Association Égyptologique Reine Élisabeth, 2008), 59–71; and John Gee, “Horos Son of Osoroeris,” in *Mélanges offerts à Ola el-Aguizy*, ed. Fayza Haikal (Paris: Institut Français D’Archéologie Orientale, 2015), 169–78.

Stone” (that is, around 200 BC) and was a priest or prophet of three Egyptian deities in the ancient city of Thebes.³ “As prophet, he was a spokesman for various gods, who interacted with prophets on a regular basis. As a prophet, Horos had been initiated into the temple’s sacred places, which represented heaven, and had promised to maintain strict standards of personal conduct and purity.”⁴

Being a priest or prophet in ancient Egypt had its privileges. For example, a prophet like Hor “had access to the great Theban temple libraries, containing narratives, reference works, and manuals, as well as scrolls on religion, ritual, and history.”⁵ Hor lived at a time when Egyptian religion was eclectic, with elements of “Greek, Jewish, and Near Eastern traditions” making their way into Egyptian culture.⁶ “The papyri owners also lived at a time when stories about Abraham circulated in Egypt. If any ancient Egyptians were in a position to know about Abraham, it was the Theban priests.”⁷

The first god whom Hor served as a prophet was Amun-Re, whose magnificent temple still stands today. As a prophet of this god, Hor “would have gone into the holy of holies and would have encountered the statue of the deity face to face. He also would have participated in the daily execration ritual, in which a wax figure of an enemy was spat upon, trampled under the left foot, smitten with a spear, bound, and placed on the fire. He also would have known a creation account that starts with God creating light and then separating out the dry land from the water, followed by the creation of multiple gods who together plan the creation, cause the sun to appear, and vanquish evil.”⁸

Hor was also a prophet of a god named Min-Who-Massacres-His-Enemies. This lesser-known god was a syncretized, or combined, deity drawing from the Egyptian god Min and the Canaanite warrior-god Resheph. “This deity was worshipped by performing human sacrifice in effigy. Two rituals are known for certain: one involves the subduing of sinners by binding them, and the other involves slaying enemies and burning them on an altar. These rituals seem to have also been part of

3. Gee, *Introduction to the Book of Abraham*, 59.

4. Gee, *Introduction to the Book of Abraham*, 59.

5. Gee, *Introduction to the Book of Abraham*, 59–61.

6. Jacco Dieleman, “Coping with a Difficult Life: Magic, Healing, and Sacred Knowledge,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Roman Egypt*, ed. Christina Riggs (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 339.

7. Gee, *An Introduction to the Book of Abraham*, 61.

8. Gee, *An Introduction to the Book of Abraham*, 61.



FIGURE 26. The hieroglyphs in this column contain the priestly titles of Horos, the owner of the papyrus. The text reads: “[Osiris, god’s father,] prophet of Amun-Re, king of the gods, prophet of Min-Who-Massacres-His-Enemies, prophet of Khonsu, the one who is powerful in Thebes.” Image of P. Joseph Smith I © Intellectual Reserve, Inc. Courtesy Church History Library, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Hieroglyphic transcription and translation modified from Rhodes (2002), 21.

the execration ritual that [Hor] would have performed as prophet of [Amun-Re].”⁹

Finally, Hor was a prophet for the god Khonsu (or Chespisichis in Greek). In this capacity he “was involved in a temple that dealt with healing people and protecting them from demons. The founding narrative of this temple deals with a pharaoh who had extensive contact with far-flung foreign lands, who takes any woman he thinks is beautiful as a wife, and who asks for and receives directions from God. The narrative also deals with the appearance of angels and God appearing in dreams to give instructions.”¹⁰

By knowing these details about Hor and his occupation we might be able to say something about the possibility of a text like the Book of Abraham having attracted his interest or having come into his possession, or at the very least why the illustrations from his papyri (Facsimiles 1 and 3) were used by Joseph Smith to illustrate the Book of Abraham.

As a priest in Thebes, Hor would have been highly literate and would have had access to texts about Abraham and other Jewish figures.¹¹ As a prophet of Amun-Re, he would have had an interest in themes such as temple initiation, seeing God face-to-face, and creation. As a prophet of both Amun-Re and Min-Who-Massacres-His-Enemies, he would have “had a professional interest in . . . stories about slaughtering and then burning people on an altar.”¹² Finally, as a prophet of the god Khonsu, he would have been attracted to a text that featured angels, contact with foreign lands, and a king who takes any woman he thinks is beautiful. These elements are, of course, prominent in the Book of Abraham.

9. Gee, *An Introduction to the Book of Abraham*, 61; compare John Gee, “Execration Rituals in Various Temples,” in 8. *Ägyptologische Tempeltagung: Interconnections between Temples, Warschau, 22.–25. September 2008*, ed. Monika Dolińska and Horst Beinlich (Wiesbaden, Ger.: Harrassowitz, 2010), 67–80; and Coenen, “Dating of the Papyri,” 1112–13.

10. Gee, *Introduction to the Book of Abraham*, 61–63; compare John Gee, “The Cult of Chespisichis,” in *Egypt in Transition: Social and Religious Development of Egypt in the First Millennium BCE*, ed. Ladislav Bareš, Filip Coppens, and Květa Smoláriková (Prague: Czech Institute of Egyptology, Charles University in Prague, 2010), 129–45.

11. Kerry Muhlestein, “Abraham, Isaac, and Osiris–Michael: The Use of Biblical Figures in Egyptian Religion, a Survey,” in *Achievements and Problems of Modern Egyptology: Proceedings of the International Conference Held in Moscow on September 29–October 2, 2009*, ed. Galina A. Belova (Moscow: Russian Academy of Sciences, 2012), 246–59; Kerry Muhlestein, “The Religious and Cultural Background of Joseph Smith Papyrus I,” *Journal of the Book of Mormon and Other Restoration Scripture* 22, no. 1 (2013): 20–33.

12. John Gee, “Some Puzzles from the Joseph Smith Papyri,” *FARMS Review* 20, no. 1 (2008): 128.

Further Reading

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- . “The Ancient Owners of the Papyri.” In *An Introduction to the Book of Abraham*, 57–72. Salt Lake City: Deseret Book; Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 2017.
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Part 3

The Facsimiles of the Book of Abraham



FIGURE 27. Facsimile 1 of the Book of Abraham as it appeared in the March 1, 1842, issue of the *Times and Seasons* under the editorship of Joseph Smith. © Intellectual Reserve, Inc. Courtesy Church History Library, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

Approaching the Facsimiles

As “the only illustrations in our scriptures,” the facsimiles of the Book of Abraham “attract attention not only because of their rough-hewn quality but by their very existence as a visual medium in the midst of the written word.”¹ Latter-day Saint scholars and interested laypersons have offered a number of different approaches to understanding the facsimiles.² Some of the more common approaches to the facsimiles include the following:

1. The facsimiles were original to Abraham. To interpret them we should look to how Egyptians in Abraham’s day, or Abraham himself, would have understood them.

1. John Gee, “A Method for Studying the Facsimiles,” *FARMS Review* 19, no. 1 (2007): 347.

2. John Gee, *A Guide to the Joseph Smith Papyri* (Provo, Utah: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 2000), 33–41; Gee, “Method for Studying the Facsimiles,” 347–53; John Gee, “The Facsimiles,” in *An Introduction to the Book of Abraham* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book; Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 2017), 143–56; Hugh Nibley, “What, Exactly, Is the Purpose and Significance of the Facsimiles in the Book of Abraham?,” *Ensign* 6, no. 3 (March 1976): 34–36; Hugh Nibley, “The Facsimiles of the Book of Abraham: A Response,” in *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), 493–501; Michael D. Rhodes, “Teaching the Book of Abraham Facsimiles,” *Religious Educator* 4, no. 2 (2003): 115–23; Michael D. Rhodes, “Facsimiles from the Book of Abraham,” in *The Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, ed. Daniel H. Ludlow, 4 vols. (New York: Macmillan, 1992), 1:135–37; Kevin L. Barney, “The Facsimiles and Semitic Adaptation of Existing Sources,” in *Astronomy, Papyrus, and Covenant*, ed. John Gee and Brian M. Hauglid (Provo, Utah: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 2005), 107–30; Allen J. Fletcher, *A Study Guide to the Facsimiles of the Book of Abraham* (Springville, Utah: Cedar Fort, 2006); Terry Givens with Brian M. Hauglid, *The Pearl of Greatest Price: Mormonism’s Most Controversial Scripture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), 142–53.

2. The facsimiles were original to Abraham but were modified over time for use by the ancient Egyptians. The facsimiles as currently preserved are much later and altered copies of Abraham's originals. To interpret them we should consider the underlying Abrahamic elements and compare them with how the Egyptians understood these images.³
3. The facsimiles were connected to the Book of Abraham when the Joseph Smith Papyri were created in the Ptolemaic period (ca. 330–30 BC). To interpret them we should look to what Egyptians of that time generally may have thought these drawings represent.⁴
4. The facsimiles were connected to the Book of Abraham for the first time in the Ptolemaic period, but to interpret them we should look specifically to how Egyptian priests who were integrating Jewish, Greek, and Mesopotamian religious practices into native Egyptian practices would have understood them.⁵
5. The facsimiles were connected to the Book of Abraham in the Ptolemaic period, but to interpret them we should look to how Jews of that era would have understood them.⁶
6. The facsimiles were never part of the Book of Abraham but instead were completely reinterpreted by Joseph Smith to artistically depict the text he revealed or translated. We can make sense of Joseph's interpretations by expanding our understanding of his role as a "translator."⁷
7. The facsimiles were never part of the Book of Abraham, but Joseph Smith, by revelation, perceived the meaning of the figures in their ancient Egyptian context and based on similarities syncretized many of them to details within the context of Abraham's life. To understand Joseph Smith's explanations in this approach, it is important to understand that some figures he interprets in their ancient Egyptian context and some figures he overlays with an Abrahamic detail due to perceived similarities between the

3. Robert C. Webb, "A Critical Examination of the Fac-Similes in the Book of Abraham," *Improvement Era* 16, no. 5 (March 1913): 435–54; H. Donl Peterson, *The Story of the Book of Abraham: Mummies, Manuscripts, and Mormonism* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1995), 252; Rhodes, "Teaching the Book of Abraham Facsimiles," 115–23.

4. Gee, "Method for Studying the Facsimiles," 347–53.

5. Kerry Muhlestein, "The Religious and Cultural Background of Joseph Smith Papyrus I," *Journal of the Book of Mormon and Other Restoration Scripture* 22, no. 1 (2013): 20–33.

6. Barney, "Facsimiles and Semitic Adaptation," 107–30.

7. Givens, *Pearl of Greatest Price*, 180–202.

Egyptian and Abrahamic concepts. This approach still requires an understanding of the figures in their ancient Egyptian context but does not assume all of Joseph Smith's explanations are how the Egyptians would have strictly understood them.⁸

Each of these approaches has its respective strengths and weaknesses, but each also requires certain assumptions at the outset in order to accept it, and it appears that no one single explanation on its own can account for all the available evidence. Although not all of these paradigms will be explored here, a few examples illustrating this point are worth bringing up. For instance, the first paradigm is a more straightforward way of thinking about the facsimiles but is severely undermined by the fact that the Joseph Smith Papyri date to many centuries after Abraham's lifetime.⁹ The second, third, and fourth paradigms are each compelling to varying degrees since they can account for the instances where Joseph Smith's interpretations of the facsimiles align with those of other Egyptologists, but no single one of them can account for his interpretations in their entirety from an Egyptological perspective.

Whichever paradigm one adopts, it seems clear that Joseph Smith's explanations of the facsimiles were original to himself (none of the explanations appear next to the illustrations on the papyri he possessed).¹⁰ "There are aspects of [these explanations] that match what Egyptologists say they mean. Some [of them] are quite compelling. . . . However, as we look at the entirety of any of the facsimiles, an Egyptological interpretation does not match what Joseph Smith said about them."¹¹ This is complicated by the fact that even though not all of Joseph Smith's

8. John S. Thompson, "'We May Not Understand Our Words': The Book of Abraham and the Concept of Translation in *The Pearl of Greatest Price*," *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 41 (2020): 24–29.

9. Michael D. Rhodes, *The Hor Book of Breathings: A Translation and Commentary* (Provo, Utah: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 2002), 3.

10. With regard to the authorship of the explanations of the facsimiles, it should be kept in mind that "while we do not know if Joseph Smith is the original author of these interpretations, we know he participated in preparing the published interpretations and gave editorial approval to them." Kerry Muhlestein, "Joseph Smith's Biblical View of Egypt," in *Approaching Antiquity: Joseph Smith and the Ancient World*, ed. Lincoln H. Blumell, Matthew J. Grey, and Andrew H. Hedges (Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2015), 469 n. 10. Compare the observations made in Quinten Zehn Barney, "The Neglected Facsimile: An Examination and Comparative Study of Facsimile No. 3 of *The Book of Abraham*" (master's thesis, Brigham Young University, 2019), 57–60.

11. Kerry Muhlestein, quoted in Stephen Smoot, "Egyptology and the Book of Abraham: An Interview with Egyptologist Kerry Muhlestein," *FairMormon Blog*

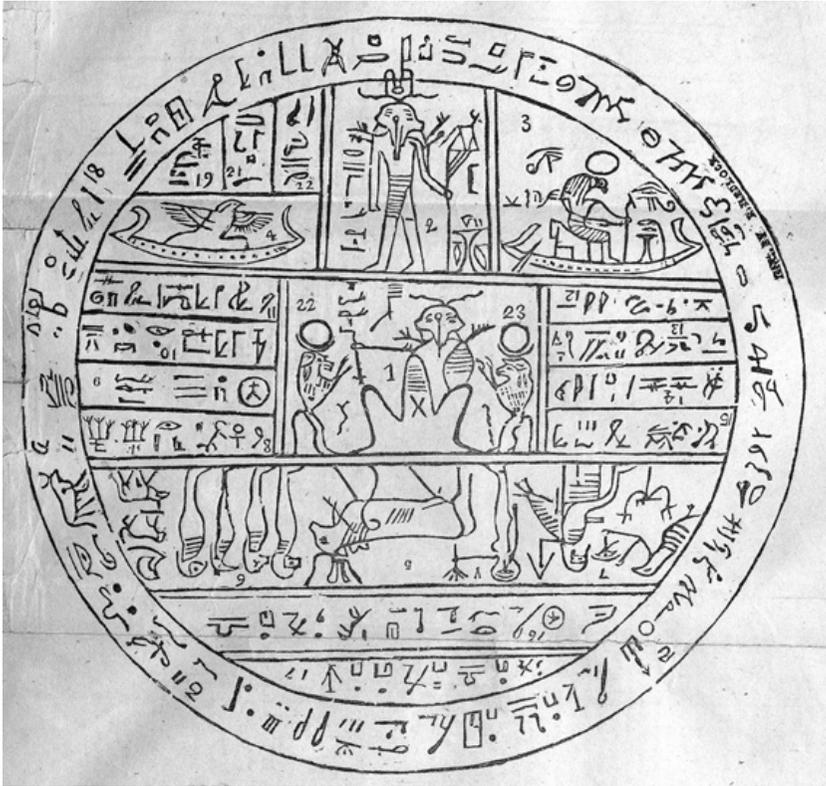


FIGURE 28. Facsimile 2 of the Book of Abraham as it appeared in the March 15, 1842, issue of the *Times and Seasons* under the editorship of Joseph Smith. © Intellectual Reserve, Inc. Courtesy Church History Library, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

explanations of the facsimiles in their entirety agree with how modern Egyptologists understand these illustrations, in many instances they do accurately reflect ancient Egyptian and Semitic concepts.¹² This requires us to carefully unpack the assumptions we bring when approaching the facsimiles under any of the theoretical paradigms listed above.

(November 14, 2013), <https://www.fairmormon.org/blog/2013/11/14/egyptology-and-the-book-of-abraham-an-interview-with-egyptologist-kerry-muhlestein>.

12. In addition to the sources cited above, see additionally Michael D. Rhodes, “The Joseph Smith Hypocephalus . . . Twenty Years Later,” unpublished manuscript, [1997], <https://www.magicgatebg.com/Books/Joseph%20Smith%20Hypocephalus.pdf>; John Gee, “Abracadabra, Isaac, and Jacob,” *Review of Books on the Book of Mormon* 7, no. 1 (1995): 19–85; and 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).



FIGURE 29. Facsimile 3 of the Book of Abraham as it appeared in the May 16, 1842, issue of the *Times and Seasons* under the editorship of Joseph Smith. © Intellectual Reserve, Inc. Courtesy Church History Library, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

Despite some important advances in scholarship, “we [still] do not [entirely] know to what we really should compare the facsimiles.” For instance, we must ask if Joseph Smith meant to give us “an interpretation [of the facsimiles] that ancient Egyptians would have held, or one that only a small group of priests interested in Abraham would have held, or one that a group of ancient Jews in Egypt would have held, or something another group altogether would have held.” Or, alternatively, “was he giving us an interpretation we needed to receive for our spiritual benefit regardless of how any ancient groups would have seen these?” The fact is that we don’t know for sure. While we “can make a pretty good case for the idea that some Egyptians could have viewed Facsimile 1 the way Joseph Smith presents it, [we are still] not sure that is the methodology we should be employing. We just don’t know enough about what Joseph Smith was doing to be sure about any possible comparisons, or lack thereof.”¹³

What is clear from all of this is that “much more work needs to be done before we can understand the facsimiles in their ancient Egyptian setting, and only then will it be meaningful to ask whether that understanding matches that of Joseph Smith (to the extent that we understand

13. Muhlestein, quoted in Smoot, “Egyptology and the Book of Abraham.”

even that).”¹⁴ For example, “Facsimile 3 has always been the most neglected of the three facsimiles in the Book of Abraham. Unfortunately, most of what has been said about this facsimile is seriously wanting at best and highly erroneous at worst.”¹⁵ Some valuable work in recent years, however, has helped remedy this by better situating this facsimile in its ancient Egyptian context.¹⁶ As that context has become clearer, elements of Joseph Smith’s explanations have become more plausible (although other elements remain at odds with current Egyptological theories).

Whichever theoretical paradigm one adopts in approaching the facsimiles, a respectable case can be made that with a number of his explanations Joseph Smith accurately captured ancient Egyptian concepts (and even scored a few bull’s-eyes with his explanations) that would have otherwise been beyond his natural ability to know.¹⁷ Any honest approach to the facsimiles must recognize this and take this into account. At the same time, however, this is not necessarily conclusive evidence that the facsimiles themselves were actually used as illustrations for Abraham’s record in antiquity. For now, then, the best approach to the facsimiles would be to remain open-minded and inquisitive and to keep asking the best questions based on the best available evidence and information.

Further Reading

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Rhodes, Michael D. “Teaching the Book of Abraham Facsimiles.” *Religious Educator* 4, no. 2 (2003): 115–23.

14. Gee, “Method for Studying the Facsimiles,” 353.

15. John Gee, “Facsimile 3 and Book of the Dead 125,” in *Astronomy, Papyrus, and Covenant: Proceedings of the 1999 Book of Abraham Conference*, ed. John Gee and Brian M. Hauglid (Provo, Utah: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 2005), 95.

16. Gee, “Facsimile 3 and Book of the Dead 125,” 95–105; Barney, “Neglected Facsimile.”

17. “Egyptian was not really understood in Joseph Smith’s day. Not a single inscription in either hieratic or hieroglyphs had been completely translated before his death, and none were published until seven years afterwards. Joseph Smith was not in the tradition of Champollion to which Egyptology today belongs. Any knowledge he may have had did not come from that source, and indeed, everyone is in agreement about that.” John Gee, “Joseph Smith and Ancient Egypt,” in Blumell, Grey, and Hedges, *Approaching Antiquity*, 443.

A Semitic View of the Facsimiles

Latter-day Saint scholars and interested laypersons have offered a number of different approaches to interpreting the facsimiles and the validity of Joseph Smith's interpretations.¹ One such scholar, Kevin L. Barney, has articulated an insightful theory for interpreting the facsimiles that is worth careful consideration.²

Responding to the legitimate questions that have been raised by Egyptologists concerning Joseph Smith's interpretations of the facsimiles, Barney proposed in a 2005 article "that the facsimiles may not have been drawn by Abraham's hand," as has sometimes been assumed by Latter-day Saints, "but may have been Egyptian religious vignettes that were adopted or adapted by an Egyptian-Jewish redactor as illustrations of the Book of Abraham." Barney further "illustrate[d the] general processes of Jewish adaptation of Egyptian sources" by offering "three specific examples from the Greco-Roman period (the same period when the Joseph Smith Papyri were produced) that each relates in some way to Abraham." Using these examples, Barney concluded "that such Jewish adaptation of Egyptian sources was common during this time period and would explain the adaptation of the facsimiles to illustrate the Book of Abraham, which may have come under this redactor's care as part of the ancient transmission of the text."³ The first example cited by Barney

1. John Gee, "A Method for Studying the Facsimiles," *FARMS Review* 19, no. 1 (2007): 347–53.

2. Kevin L. Barney, "The Facsimiles and Semitic Adaptation of Existing Sources," in *Astronomy, Papyrus, and Covenant*, ed. John Gee and Brian M. Hauglid (Provo, Utah: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 2005), 107–30. For an earlier treatment that converges with Barney's thinking on many points, see Blake T. Ostler, "Abraham: An Egyptian Connection," *FARMS Report* (1981).

3. Barney, "Facsimiles and Semitic Adaptation," 108.

is the apocryphal Testament of Abraham (probably composed in Greek in the first century AD in Egypt).

The *Testament of Abraham* tells the story of how when Abraham had lived the full measure of his mortal existence, God sent the archangel Michael—his “commander in chief”—to inform Abraham so that he might arrange his affairs prior to his death. Abraham refuses to follow Michael, however, and desires a tour of the whole inhabited world before he dies. Michael and Abraham survey the world in a divine chariot, and whenever Abraham sees someone sinning he asks for the sinner to be struck down. God then puts an end to the tour, since his own practice is to be patient with sinners in order to give them an opportunity to repent. Abraham is then shown the judgment, which is the scene we will examine in some detail below. Abraham repents of his harshness, and the sinners who had been struck down at his request are restored to life. Abraham, however, still refuses to follow Michael. So God sends Death, who, by a deception, gets Abraham’s soul to accompany him, whence he returns to the presence of God.⁴

The judgment scene in the Testament of Abraham, in particular, is striking. As summarized by Barney,

Abraham sees two fiery-looking angels driving myriad souls to judgment. The judgment hall is situated between a narrow gate for the use of the righteous and a broad gate for the wicked. In the judgment hall there is a terrifying throne, and seated on the throne is a wondrous man, with an appearance like unto a son of God. In front of this figure is a crystal-like table, covered with gold and fine linen. Resting on the table is a book. On either side of the table are angels holding papyrus and ink. In front of the table is a light-bearing angel holding a balance, and on his left is a fiery angel holding a trumpet full of fire. The man on the throne judges the souls. The two angels with papyrus record; the one on the right records the deceased’s righteous deeds, and the one on the left records sins. The angel with the balance weighs the souls, and the fiery angel tries them with fire. Michael informs Abraham that this scene represents judgment and recompense.

Abraham asks Michael specifically who all of these figures are and is informed that the judge seated upon the throne is Abel, who judges men until the Parousia (second coming). At the Parousia, everyone is to be judged by the twelve tribes of Israel, and, finally, God himself shall judge all men, so that the judgment may be established by three witnesses. Michael tells Abraham that the angels on the right and left

4. Barney, “Facsimiles and Semitic Adaptation,” 116–17.

record righteous deeds and sins. The sunlike . . . angel holding the balance is the archangel Dokiel, the righteous balance-bearer, who weighs the righteous deeds and sins. The fiery angel who tests the works of men with fire is the archangel Purouel. Everything is tested both by fire and by balance.⁵

This, Barney rightly notes, is significant because the Testament of Abraham appears to be drawing directly from the judgment imagery in chapter 125 from the Egyptian Book of the Dead.⁶ As another scholar has more recently argued, “There are many obvious parallels between the *Testament of Abraham* and the traditional Egyptian judgment scene, especially regarding the judgment by scales,” and it appears that the author of the *Testament of Abraham* was “very familiar with Egyptian judgment scenes” and perhaps even “playing with them as he had with biblical figures to weave a memorable tale” and develop his understanding of the final judgment.⁷

The second example used by Barney is the attested syncretization of the Egyptian god Osiris with the biblical figure of Abraham.⁸ As Barney notes, some scholars have posited the dependence of Jesus’s parable of Lazarus and the rich man in Luke 16:19–31 on an older Egyptian version of the story.⁹ In the Egyptian text known as the tale of Setne, a boy named Si-Osiris (“son of Osiris”) and his father witness “two funerals: first, that of a rich man, shrouded in fine linen, loudly lamented and abundantly honored; then, that of a poor man, wrapped in a straw mat, unaccompanied and unmourned. The father says that he would rather have the lot of the rich man than that of the pauper.”¹⁰ To show his father the folly of this way of thinking, Si-Osiris takes him to the underworld, where the rich man who had an elaborate funeral is punished while the pauper who had no dignified burial is glorified and exalted in the presence of the god Osiris himself. “The reason for this disparate treatment

5. Barney, “Facsimiles and Semitic Adaptation,” 117.

6. Barney, “Facsimiles and Semitic Adaptation,” 117–18.

7. Jared Ludlow, “Appropriation of Egyptian Judgment in the Testament of Abraham?,” in *Evolving Egypt: Innovation, Appropriation, and Reinterpretation in Ancient Egypt*, ed. Kerry Muhlestein (Oxford: Archaeopress, 2012), 102.

8. Barney, “Facsimiles and Semitic Adaptation,” 119–21.

9. Hugo Gressmann, *Vom reichen Mann und armen Lazarus: Eine literargeschichtliche Studie* (Berlin: Königliche Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1918); K. Grobel, “. . . Whose Name Was Neves,” *New Testament Studies* 10 (1963–1964): 373–82; Outi Lehtipuu, *The Afterlife Imagery in Luke’s Story of the Rich Man and Lazarus* (Leiden, Neth.: Brill, 2007), 11–18.

10. Barney, “Facsimiles and Semitic Adaptation,” 120–21.

is that, at the judgment, the good deeds of the pauper outweighed the bad, but with the rich man the opposite was true.”¹¹ As explained by Barney, “Once again we are able to see how the Egyptian story has been transformed in Semitic dress. . . . The ‘bosom of Abraham’ [from the Lucan parable] represents . . . the Egyptian abode of the dead. And, most remarkably, Abraham is a Jewish substitute for the pagan god Osiris—just as is the case in Facsimiles 1 and 3.”¹²

Finally, Barney draws attention to another apocryphal text, the *Apocalypse of Abraham*, “a kind of companion text to the *Testament of Abraham*.” The *Apocalypse of Abraham* “tells the story of how Abraham in his youth perceived that idols were simply creations of men and not really gods. After leaving his father’s house, Abraham is commanded to offer a sacrifice so that God will reveal great things to him. God sends his angel Iaoel to take Abraham on a tour of heaven, during which he sees seven visions.”¹³ Citing earlier work by Latter-day Saint Egyptologist Michael Rhodes,¹⁴ Barney points to “what appear to be possible allusions to a hypocephalus [the kind of circular object that Facsimile 2 is] in the *Apocalypse of Abraham*.”

During his vision Abraham is shown “the fulness of the whole world and its circle,” which appears to be a description of a hypocephalus. This vision includes the plan of the universe, “what is in the heavens, on the earth, in the sea, and in the abyss,” which are very close to the words used in the left middle portion of the Joseph Smith hypocephalus. The *Apocalypse* also includes a description of four fiery living creatures, each with four faces: that of a lion, a man, an ox, and an eagle. This is almost certainly a Semitic transformation of the Sons of Horus (via Ezekiel 1–2), which are represented as figure 6 of Facsimile 2.¹⁵

Based on these examples, Barney argues that “studying only the Egyptian context of the facsimiles will never yield a complete explanation of the significance of Joseph’s interpretations. We need to be able to look at them the way [a hypothetical ancient Jewish redactor] did, as Semitized illustrations of the Book of Abraham. When we see them

11. Barney, “Facsimiles and Semitic Adaptation,” 121.

12. Barney, “Facsimiles and Semitic Adaptation,” 121; compare Grobel, “. . . Whose Name Was Neves,” 380.

13. Barney, “Facsimiles and Semitic Adaptation,” 121.

14. Michael D. Rhodes, “The Joseph Smith Hypocephalus . . . Seventeen Years Later,” *FARMS paper* (1994), 6.

15. Barney, “Facsimiles and Semitic Adaptation,” 121–22.

from this perspective, our vision gains clarity, and the facsimiles and Joseph's interpretations come into focus."¹⁶

While this theory is compelling, it does require Latter-day Saints to reject some traditional assumptions about the facsimiles, such as the belief that, as preserved in the Joseph Smith Papyri, they were personally drawn by Abraham himself.¹⁷ This theory likewise presupposes a more complex transmission of the Book of Abraham text than perhaps traditionally recognized.¹⁸ However, acceptance of these two points to accommodate Barney's theory is by no means fatal to the inspiration of the Book of Abraham and in fact may even help clear up some of the objections Egyptologists have made against Joseph Smith's interpretation of the facsimiles.¹⁹

Ultimately, there is still much to discuss and consider when it comes to the interpretation of the facsimiles of the Book of Abraham. Barney's theory, while perhaps not definitive, is "valuable and attractive" and offers important "new avenues for further research."²⁰ It also provides one way to understand Joseph Smith's interpretations of the facsimiles in a plausible ancient light.²¹

16. Barney, "Facsimiles and Semitic Adaptation," 119.

17. John Gee, *A Guide to the Joseph Smith Papyri* (Provo, Utah: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 2000), 28–30, explores different theories for understanding and explaining the facsimiles.

18. Barney, "Facsimiles and Semitic Adaptation," 124–25; compare Gee, *Guide to the Joseph Smith Papyri*, 27–28.

19. Barney, "Facsimiles and Semitic Adaptation," 126–28.

20. Kerry Muhlestein, "Approaching Understandings in the Book of Abraham," *FARMS Review* 18, no. 2 (2006): 239; compare Gee, "Method for Studying the Facsimiles," 352.

21. There are several potential paradigms for evaluating Joseph Smith's interpretations of the facsimiles, each resting on certain assumptions that require analysis and unpacking. "There are aspects of Joseph Smith's interpretations of the facsimiles that match what Egyptologists say they mean. Some aspects are quite compelling, especially for Facsimile 1. However, as we look at the entirety of any of the facsimiles, an Egyptological interpretation does not match what Joseph Smith said about them. That being said, we do not know to what we really should compare the facsimiles. Was Joseph Smith giving us an interpretation that ancient Egyptians would have held, or one that only a small group of priests interested in Abraham would have held, or one that a group of ancient Jews in Egypt would have held, or something another group altogether would have held, or was he giving us an interpretation we needed to receive for our spiritual benefit regardless of how any ancient groups would have seen these? We do not know. While I can make a pretty good case for the idea that some Egyptians could have viewed Facsimile 1 the way Joseph Smith presents it, I am not sure that is the methodology we should be employing. We just don't know enough about what Joseph Smith was doing to be sure

Further Reading

- Barney, Kevin L. “The Facsimiles and Semitic Adaptation of Existing Sources.” In *Astronomy, Papyrus, and Covenant*, edited by John Gee and Brian M. Hauglid, 107–30. Provo, Utah: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 2005.
- Gee, John. “A Method for Studying the Facsimiles.” *FARMS Review* 19, no. 1 (2007): 347–53.
- Ostler, Blake T. “Abraham: An Egyptian Connection.” FARMS Report (1981).

about any possible comparisons, or lack thereof.” See Stephen Smoot, “Egyptology and the Book of Abraham: An Interview with Egyptologist Kerry Muhlestein,” FairMormon Blog (November 14, 2013), <https://www.fairmormon.org/blog/2013/11/14/egyptology-and-the-book-of-abraham-an-interview-with-egyptologist-kerry-muhlestein>.

Facsimile 1 as a Sacrifice Scene

Facsimile 1 of the Book of Abraham visually depicts the narrative contained in Abraham 1:12–19. As interpreted by Joseph Smith, this scene depicts Abraham fastened upon an altar before some idolatrous gods. An idolatrous priest is about to sacrifice Abraham, who is protected by the angel of the Lord.

Since the mid-1800s, when Egyptologists first began analyzing the facsimiles of the Book of Abraham, Joseph Smith’s interpretation of this scene (sometimes called a lion couch scene, due to the prominent lion couch at the center of the illustrations) has clashed with Egyptological interpretations. In 1860, the French Egyptologist Théodule Devéria interpreted Facsimile 1 as depicting the resurrection of the god Osiris.¹ In 1912, Egyptologists interpreted Facsimile 1 as, variously, “the well known scene of Anubis preparing the body of the dead man,”² “a resurrection scene” showing “Osiris rising from the dead,”³ “an embalmer preparing a body for burial,”⁴ “the body of the dead lying” on a funerary bier,⁵ and “a dead man . . . lying on a bier” and being prepared for mummification.⁶ Similar interpretations of Facsimile 1 have been given in more recent years.⁷

1. Jules Remy, *Voyage au pays des Mormons*, 2 vols. (Paris: E. Dentu, 1860), 2:463; compare Jules Remy and Julius Brenchley, *A Journey to the Great-Salt-Lake City*, 2 vols. (London: W. Jeffs, 1861), 2:540.

2. F. S. Spalding, *Joseph Smith, Jr., as a Translator* (Salt Lake City: Arrow Press, [1912]), 23.

3. Spalding, *Joseph Smith, Jr., as a Translator*, 26.

4. Spalding, *Joseph Smith, Jr., as a Translator*, 28.

5. Spalding, *Joseph Smith, Jr., as a Translator*, 30.

6. Spalding, *Joseph Smith, Jr., as a Translator*, 30.

7. See, for example, Michael D. Rhodes, *The Hor Book of Breathings: A Translation and Commentary* (Provo, Utah: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 2002), 18–20.

From the weight of this Egyptological opinion, it may seem strange to associate Facsimile 1 with sacrifice as Joseph Smith did. However, more recent investigation has turned up evidence that suggests a connection between sacred violence and scenes of the embalming and resurrection of the deceased (or the god Osiris). Evidence linking Osiris's mummification and resurrection with execration rituals can be detected "in the roof chapels of the Dendara Temple."⁸ Other Egyptologists have already drawn parallels between Facsimile 1 and the Dendara Temple scenes depicting the resurrection of Osiris⁹ but have failed to notice the connection these scenes make with ritual violence.¹⁰ For example, the inscription accompanying one such scene says of evildoers: "He will not exist, nor will his name exist, since you will destroy his town, cast down the wall of his house, and everyone who is in it will be set on fire; you will demolish his district; you will stab his confederates, his flesh being ashes, the evil conspirator consigned to the slaughterhouse so that he will no longer exist."¹¹

It may also be noteworthy in this regard that in these texts the word for the "lion couch" (*nmit*) is homophonous, or nearly identical, with the word for "abattoir, slaughterhouse" (*nmt*) as well as for "offerings" (*nmt*).¹² This homophony could plausibly have contributed to an association or relationship between the two words in the minds of some Egyptians, and examples from the Dendara Temple seem to indicate this. For instance, "in the same chapel, we have depictions of Anubis and the sons of Horus (presumably the figures under the lion couch in Facsimile 1) holding knives." The text accompanying these figures gives us a sense of what purpose they serve in the scenes.

8. John Gee, "Some Puzzles from the Joseph Smith Papyri," *FARMS Review* 20, no. 1 (2008): 132; John Gee, "Execration Rituals in Various Temples," in 8. *Ägyptologische Tempeltagung: Interconnections between Temples, Warschau, 22.–25. September 2008*, ed. Monika Dolińska and Horst Beinlich (Wiesbaden, Ger.: Harrassowitz, 2010), 67–80, esp. 73–79.

9. Lanny Bell, "The Ancient Egyptian 'Books of Breathing,' the Mormon 'Book of Abraham,' and the Development of Egyptology in America," in *Egypt and Beyond: Essays Presented to Leonard H. Lesko upon His Retirement from the Wilbour Chair of Egyptology at Brown University, June 2005*, ed. Stephen E. Thompson and Peter Der Manuelian (Providence, R.I.: Brown University Press, 2008), 26–28.

10. Gee, "Execration Rituals in Various Temples," 73–79.

11. Translation in Gee, "Execration Rituals in Various Temples," 74; for the hieroglyphic text, see Sylvie Cauville, *Le Temple de Dendara: Les chapelles osiriennes* (Cairo: IFAO, 1997), 200.

12. Gee, "Some Puzzles from the Joseph Smith Papyri," 132; compare Penelope Wilson, *A Ptolemaic Lexicon* (Leuven: Peeters, 1997), 516–17, 521–22.

Anubis is here identified as the one “who smites the adversaries with his might, since the knife is in his hand, to expel the one who treads in transgression; I am the violent one who came forth from god, after having cut off the heads of the confederates of him whose name is evil.” The human-headed son of Horus is identified above his head as “the one who repulses enemies” and “who comes tearing out (*šd*) the enemies who butchers (*ths*) the sinners.” The baboon-headed son of Horus says: “I have slaughtered those who create injuries in the house of God in his presence; I take away the breath from his nostrils.” The jackal-headed son of Horus says: “I cause the hostile foreigners to retreat.” Finally, the falcon-headed son of Horus says: “I have removed rebellion (*h3y*).”¹³

From this and other evidence,¹⁴ it can be seen that at least some ancient Egyptians associated scenes of the resurrection of Osiris with the slaughter of enemies. Why might some ancient Egyptians have done so? It may relate to the myth of the resurrection of the god Osiris, which lion couch scenes were meant to depict. In the classic retelling of the myth, Osiris was slain and mutilated by his evil brother, Seth. Through the efforts of his sister-wife, Isis, the body of Osiris was magically reassembled and resurrected. The final vindication came when their son Horus slew Seth in combat and claimed kingship.¹⁵ The element in this myth of Horus slaying Seth and thereby the forces of chaos or disorder (including foreign peoples, rebels, and enemies of Pharaoh) might explain why sacrifice may have been associated with embalming and mummification in some contexts.¹⁶

13. Gee, “Some Puzzles from the Joseph Smith Papyri,” 132–33; compare John Gee, “Glossed Over: Ancient Egyptian Interpretations of Their Religion,” in *Evolving Egypt: Innovation, Appropriation, and Reinterpretation in Ancient Egypt*, ed. Kerry Muhlestein (Oxford: Archaeopress, 2012), 74. Cauville, *Le Temple de Dendara*, 2:107, calls these figures defending Osiris “aggressive genies” (*les génies agressifs*) who form a “defensive zone” (*zone de défense*) around his body.

14. Gee, “Some Puzzles from the Joseph Smith Papyri,” 134–35.

15. Geraldine Pinch, *Egyptian Mythology: A Guide to the Gods, Goddesses, and Traditions of Ancient Egypt* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 193–94; compare A. M. Blackman and H. W. Fairman, “The Myth of Horus at Edfu. II. C. The Triumph of Horus over His Enemies: A Sacred Drama,” *Journal of Egyptian Archaeology* 28 (1942): 32–38; A. M. Blackman and H. W. Fairman, “The Myth of Horus at Edfu. II. C. The Triumph of Horus over His Enemies: A Sacred Drama (Continued),” *Journal of Egyptian Archaeology* 29 (1943): 2–36; and A. M. Blackman and H. W. Fairman, “The Myth of Horus at Edfu. II. C. The Triumph of Horus over His Enemies: A Sacred Drama (Concluded),” *Journal of Egyptian Archaeology* 30 (1944): 5–22.

16. This connection is explicitly made in Papyrus Jumilhac. See Harco Willems, “Anubis as Judge,” in *Egyptian Religion: The Last Thousand Years, Part 1: Studies Dedicated*

Interestingly, a papyrus from the first century BC (not far removed from the time of the Joseph Smith Papyri) “comments on the fate suffered in the embalming place during the initial stages of mummification by one who was overly concerned with amassing wealth while alive.”¹⁷ As read in the text, “It is the chief of the spirits (=Anubis) who is first to punish after the taking of breath. Juniper oil, incense, natron, and salt, searing ingredients, are a ‘remedy’ for his wounds. A ‘friend’ who shows no mercy attacks his flesh. He is unable to say ‘desist’ during the punishment of the assessor.”¹⁸ Commenting on this passage, Egyptologist Mark Smith observes that in this text “the embalming table [the lion couch] is also a judge’s tribunal and the chief embalmer, Anubis, doubles as the judge who executes sentence. For the wicked man, mummification, the very process which is supposed to restore life and grant immortality, becomes a form of torture from which no escape is possible.”¹⁹ That Anubis had a role as judge of the dead, besides merely being an embalmer, has previously been acknowledged by Egyptologists.²⁰

One task Anubis fulfilled with this role was as a guard or protector who “administer[ed] horrible punishments to the enemies of Osiris.”²¹ From surviving evidence it is apparent that “Anubis must have been engaged in warding off evil influences, and it is conceivable that he did so as a judge. . . . [One Egyptian text even] identifies Anubis as a butcher slaying the enemies of Osiris while [another] states that such butchers are in fact a company of magistrates.”²² As a “reckoner of hearts” (*ip ibw*), Anubis was “the inflictor of the punishment . . . of the enemies” of Osiris.²³ So from the perspective of the ancient Egyptians, the process of embalming and mummification included elements of ritual violence against evildoers or agents of chaos. “The punishment of enemies by a ‘judge’ is simply a part of the protective ritual enacted in connection with the embalment of the deceased.”²⁴

to the Memory of Jan Quaegebeur, ed. Willy Clarysse, Antoon Schoors, and Harco Willems (Leuven: Peeters, 1998), 741.

17. Mark S. Smith, *Traversing Eternity: Texts for the Afterlife from Ptolemaic and Roman Egypt* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 26.

18. Smith, *Traversing Eternity*, 26–27.

19. Smith, *Traversing Eternity*, 27.

20. Willems, “Anubis as Judge,” 719–43.

21. Willems, “Anubis as Judge,” 726.

22. Willems, “Anubis as Judge,” 727.

23. Willems, “Anubis as Judge,” 735.

24. Willems, “Anubis as Judge,” 740; compare Cauville, *Le Temple de Dendara*, 2:108, who observes that the role of Anubis in these Dendara embalming scenes is to act as

To be sure, there are still some significant differences in how Joseph Smith interpreted the lion couch scene in Facsimile 1. For one thing, embalming and mummification were only ever performed after the death of a person and were never meant to inflict death or otherwise sacrifice the person on the lion couch. Likewise, Anubis and the other figures attending to the mummification of the dead were meant to slaughter the enemies of Osiris, certainly not the figure of Osiris on the lion couch. This is therefore not to suggest that somehow Abraham had already been killed and was then set to be mummified. Nor is it to suggest that these parallels are perfect matches for how Joseph Smith interpreted this scene. Rather, it is to say that “excluding a sacrificial dimension to lion couch scenes” or scenes depicting the mummification of Osiris, which is how Egyptologists have interpreted Facsimile 1, “is un-Egyptian, even if we cannot come up with one definitive reading [of Facsimile 1] at this time.”²⁵

Further Reading

- Gee, John. “The Facsimiles.” In *An Introduction to the Book of Abraham*, 143–56. Salt Lake City: Deseret Book; Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 2017.
- . “Some Puzzles from the Joseph Smith Papyri.” *FARMS Review* 20, no. 1 (2008): 113–37, esp. 130–35.
- Nibley, Hugh. “Facsimile 1: A Unique Document.” In *An Approach to the Book of Abraham*, edited by John Gee, 115–78. 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.

both an embalmer and a butcher of Osiris’s enemies. “Cette double fonction est aussi assumée par les trois Anubis: préposés à l’embaumement (*hnty sh-ntr, nb w^cbt, imi-wt*), ils massacrent Seth et le découpent en morceaux.”

25. Gee, “Some Puzzles from the Joseph Smith Papyri,” 135.



FIGURE 30. A side-by-side comparison of figure 3 in Facsimile 1, as published by Joseph Smith in 1842 (*right*), and the original papyrus fragment (*left*). © Intellectual Reserve, Inc. Courtesy Church History Library, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

The Idolatrous Priest (Facsimile 1, Figure 3)

The explanation accompanying figure 3 of Facsimile 1 of the Book of Abraham identifies it as “the idolatrous priest of Elkenah attempting to offer up Abraham as a sacrifice.” In order to gauge the validity of this interpretation from an Egyptological perspective, assuming this is the approach one wishes to take, a number of factors need to be considered.

The first issue to resolve is the matter of the lacunae, or missing pieces, in the original papyrus fragment. As printed in the March 1, 1842, issue of the *Times and Seasons*, figure 3 is shown as a standing figure with a bald head and a drawn knife. In the original papyrus fragment, however, the areas with the bald head and knife are currently missing. At some unknown point by some unknown person, an attempt was made to fill in the missing head of figure 3, although no such attempt was made to fill in whatever is missing in the figure’s hand. Determining whether the figure in the original papyrus is accurately represented in Facsimile 1 is important, because it may affect the interpretation of this figure.

First, there is the question as to whether the knife being held by figure 3 could plausibly have been in the original vignette or illustration. “The existence of the knife has been doubted by many because it does not conform to what other Egyptian papyri would lead us to expect,”¹ and so some Egyptologists have denied the possibility that the knife was original to this illustration (even if others have had no objection to the possibility).²

1. John Gee, “Eyewitness, Hearsay, and Physical Evidence of the Joseph Smith Papyri,” in *The Disciple as Witness: Essays on Latter-day Saint History and Doctrine in Honor of Richard Lloyd Anderson*, ed. Stephen D. Ricks, Donald W. Parry, and Andrew H. Hedges (Provo, Utah: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 2000), 186.

2. On the conflicting Egyptological opinions, see Friedrich Freiherr von Bissing, in F. S. Spalding, *Joseph Smith, Jr., as a Translator* (Salt Lake City: Arrow Press, [1912]), 30; and George R. Hughes, quoted in Hugh Nibley, *An Approach to the Book of Abraham*, ed.

At least two different nineteenth-century eyewitnesses who examined the papyri, however, reported seeing “a Priest, with a knife in his hand”³ or “a man standing by [the figure on the lion couch] with a drawn knife.”⁴ The significance of this is that the presence of a knife in the original papyrus “has here been described by . . . eyewitness[es] whose description of the storage and preservation of the papyri matches that of independent contemporary accounts. . . . This gives us two independent eyewitnesses to the presence of a knife on Facsimile 1, regardless of what we might [otherwise] think.”⁵ As such, despite what some scholars assume should be on the original papyrus, “it is not valid to argue that something does not exist because it does not correspond to what we expect.”⁶

Furthermore, the crescent shape of the knife in figure 3’s hand is consistent with the shape of ancient Egyptian flint knives that were used in ancient Egypt for, among other activities, “ritual slaughter” and execration rites.⁷ Indeed, “killing involving flint [knives] is connected in myth

John Gee, *The Collected Works of Hugh Nibley* 18 (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book; Provo, Utah: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 2009), 144, who saw nothing inordinate with figure 3 holding a knife; but contrast with Klaus Baer, “The Breathing Permit of Hôr: A Translation of the Apparent Source of the Book of Abraham,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 3, no. 3 (Autumn 1968): 118 n. 34; Stephen E. Thompson, “Egyptology and the Book of Abraham,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 28, no. 1 (1995): 148–49; and Lanny Bell, “The Ancient Egyptian ‘Books of Breathing,’ the Mormon ‘Book of Abraham,’ and the Development of Egyptology in America,” in *Egypt and Beyond: Essays Presented to Leonard H. Lesko upon His Retirement from the Wilbour Chair of Egyptology at Brown University June 2005*, ed. Stephen E. Thompson and Peter der Manuelian (Providence, R.I.: Brown University Press, 2008), 25 nn. 27, 30.

3. William I. Appleby, Journal, May 5, 1841, 72, MS 1401, Church History Library; reprinted in Brian M. Hauglid, ed., *A Textual History of the Book of Abraham: Manuscripts and Editions* (Provo, Utah: Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, 2010), 279. That this source indeed dates to 1841 and is not just a later retrospective can be determined by the publication of excerpts of Appleby’s journal in a contemporary newspaper. See “Journal of a Mormon,” *Christian Observer* 20, no. 37 (September 10, 1841): 146.

4. Henry Caswall, *The City of the Mormons; or, Three Days at Nauvoo, in 1842* (London: Rivington, 1842), 23.

5. Gee, “Eyewitness, Hearsay, and Physical Evidence,” 186.

6. Gee, “Eyewitness, Hearsay, and Physical Evidence,” 208 n. 38.

7. Robert Kriech Ritner, *The Mechanics of Ancient Egyptian Magical Practice* (Chicago: Oriental Institute, 1993), 163, see additionally 163–67; Marquardt Lund, “Egyptian Depictions of Flintknapping from the Old and Middle Kingdom, in Light of Experiments and Experience,” in *Egyptology in the Present: Experiential and Experimental Methods in Archaeology*, ed. Carolyn Graves-Brown (Swansea: Classical Press of Wales, 2015), 113–37; Carolyn Graves-Brown, “Flint and Forts: The Role of Flint in Late Middle-New Kingdom Egyptian Weaponry,” in *Walls of the Prince: Egyptian Interactions with*

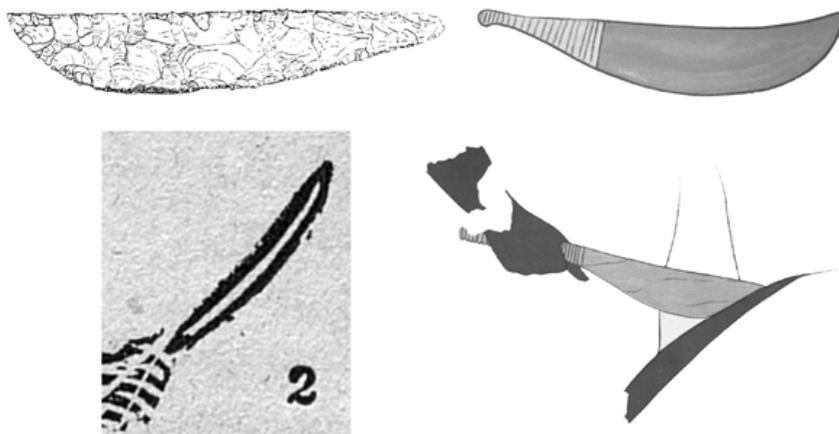


FIGURE 31. The knife in Facsimile 1 (*bottom left*) is consistent in shape with recovered flint knives (*top left*) and depictions of flint knives (*top right, bottom right*) from the Middle Kingdom. Images starting at top left and running clockwise: Petrie (1891), plate VII; Griffith (1896), plate VIII; Griffith (1896), plate IX; © Intellectual Reserve, Inc. Courtesy Church History Library, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

to sacramental killings, killings involving the restoration of order and the defeat of evil.”⁸ The mythological and practical significance of the flint (or sometimes obsidian) knife as a means of both destroying evil through execration rituals and preparing the deceased for embalming (which in some ways were conceptually linked in the minds of some ancient Egyptians) appears to have survived into the Ptolemaic Period.⁹ This strongly reinforces the likelihood that the knife was original to the scene.

Second, there is the question of whether figure 3 originally had a bald human head, as depicted in Facsimile 1, or a black jackal headdress, as

Southwest Asia in Antiquity: Essays in Honour of John S. Holladay, Jr., ed. Timothy P. Harrison, Edward B. Banning, and Stanley Klassen (Leiden, Neth.: Brill, 2015), 37–59; William M. Flinders Petrie, *Illahun, Kahun and Gurob: 1889–1890* (London: David Nutt, 1891) 52–53, plate VII; f. Ll. Griffith, *Beni Hasan, Part III* (London: Egypt Exploration Fund, 1896), 33–38, plates VII–X.

8. Carolyn Anne Graves-Brown, “The Ideological Significance of Flint in Dynastic Egypt” (PhD diss., University College London, 2010), 1:278; compare Kerry Muhlestein, *Violence in the Service of Order: The Religious Framework for Sanctioned Killing in Ancient Egypt* (Oxford: Archaeopress, 2011), esp. 18–20, 37–41.

9. Graves-Brown, “Ideological Significance of Flint,” 1:144–45, 208, 223, 242–44, 271–73; Christina Riggs, *Unwrapping Ancient Egypt* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), 91–92; R. L. Vos, *The Apis Embalming Ritual: P. Vindob. 3873* (Leuven: Peeters, 1993), 195 n. 110.



FIGURE 32. The faint remaining traces of what seems to have been a jackal headdress appear over the shoulder of figure 3 of Facsimile 1. © Intellectual Reserve, Inc. Courtesy Church History Library, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

proposed by a number of Egyptologists.¹⁰ That the figure originally had a jackal headdress seems likely, since traces of the headdress over the left shoulder of figure 3 can be detected in the surviving papyrus fragment.

With these considerations in mind, the question of identifying figure 3 comes into play. Some Egyptologists have identified this figure as a

priest,¹¹ while others have insisted it is the god Anubis.¹² That the figure is Anubis seems plausible on account of “the black coloring of the skin”¹³ and the faint remaining traces of the jackal headdress over the figure’s left shoulder. However, without a hieroglyphic caption for this figure,¹⁴ this

10. Théodule Devéria, in Remy, *Voyage au pays des Mormons*, 2:463; Devéria in Remy and Brenchley, *Journey to the Great-Salt-Lake City*, 2:540; Bell, “Ancient Egyptian ‘Books of Breathing,’” 30.

11. James H. Breasted, Friedrich Freiherr von Bissing, and Edward Meyer in Spalding, *Joseph Smith, Jr., as a Translator*, 26, 30; George R. Hughes, in Nibley, *Approach to the Book of Abraham*, 144; John Gee, “Abracadabra, Isaac, and Jacob,” *FARMS Review of Books* 7, no. 1 (1995): 80–83; Nibley, *Approach to the Book of Abraham*, 34, 288, 494–95.

12. Devéria, in Jules Remy, *Voyage au pays des Mormons*, 2:463; Devéria in Remy and Brenchley, *Journey to the Great-Salt-Lake City*, 2:540; William Flinders Petrie in Spalding, *Joseph Smith, Jr., as a Translator*, 23; Baer, “Breathing Permit of Hôr,” 118; Thompson, “Egyptology and the Book of Abraham,” 144; Rhodes, *Hor Book of Breathings*, 18; Bell, “Ancient Egyptian ‘Books of Breathing,’” 23.

13. Rhodes, *Hor Book of Breathings*, 18.

14. There appears to have been one hieroglyphic caption above the arm of figure 3 in the original vignette preserved in Facsimile 1, but it is too damaged to read.

identification should be accepted cautiously, since Anubis is not the only jackal-headed, black-skinned figure attested in Egyptian iconography.¹⁵

What's more, the question as to whether the figure is a priest or the god Anubis (or another jackal-headed god), or whether it originally had a bald human head or a jackal head, appears to be a false dichotomy. "The practice of masking for ritual and ceremonial purposes seems to have been important in Egypt from the earliest times and continued to be an element of ritual practice into the Roman period,"¹⁶ and "priestly impersonators of Anubis regularly appear in funerary ceremonies, and are styled simply *Inpw*, 'Anubis' or *rmt-Inpw*, 'Anubis-men' . . . [or] *ink Inpw*, 'I am Anubis.'¹⁷ At the Hathor temple of Deir el-Medineh, for example, is a depiction of a ritual taken from chapter 125 of the Book of the Dead, which shows "the king offering incense, and a priest masked as Anubis beating a round frame drum."¹⁸

Similarly, frescoes at the site of Herculaneum depict "ceremonies of the cult of Isis as held in Italy in the first century CE."¹⁹ This ritual scene features a number of priests and priestesses, including one figure who has been variously interpreted as the god Osiris or a priest dressed up as the god Bes and disguised with a mask. "Although the Herculaneum dancer probably represents a masked participant impersonating the god, the matter [would have been] theologically unimportant" to the ancient viewers of this scene, since the priest "masked as Bes" performing the ritual would, for all intents and purposes, have assumed the identity of

15. As noted in Gee, "Eyewitness, Hearsay, and Physical Evidence of the Joseph Smith Papyri," 208 n. 38, the figure could potentially be the jackal-headed god *Isdes* (who, incidentally, wields a knife). See Christian Leitz, *Lexikon der ägyptischen Götter und Götterbezeichnungen* (Leuven: Peeters, 2002), 1:560–61; and, additionally, Diletta D'antoni, *Il Dio Isdes* (BA thesis, University of Bologna, 2014), 8–9, on the identity of the god *Isdes* as judge and punisher of the dead.

16. Penelope Wilson, "Masking and Multiple Personas," in *Ancient Egyptian Demonology: Studies on the Boundaries between the Demonic and the Divine in Egyptian Magic*, ed. P. Kousoulis (Leuven: Peeters, 2011), 77.

17. Ritner, *Mechanics of Ancient Egyptian Magical Practice*, 249 n. 1142; compare Wilson, "Masking and Multiple Personas," 78–79; and Carolyn Graves-Brown, *Daemons and Spirits in Ancient Egypt* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2018), 54–55.

18. Alexandra von Lieven, "Book of the Dead, Book of the Living: BD Spells as Temple Texts," *Journal of Egyptian Archaeology* 98 (2012): 263.

19. Robert K. Ritner, "Osiris-Canopus and Bes at Herculaneum," in *Joyful in Thebes: Egyptological Studies in Honor of Betsy M. Bryan*, ed. Richard Jasnow and Kathlyn M. Cooney (Atlanta: Lockwood Press, 2015), 401.

the god himself in that ritual capacity.²⁰ All of this holds clear significance for Joseph Smith's interpretation of this figure in Facsimile 1.²¹

If we assume for the sake of argument that the head of figure 3 of Facsimile 1 is correct, and that the figure originally had a bald head, then what might the implications be for identifying this figure? "Shaving was a common feature of initiation into the priesthood from the Old Kingdom through the Roman period" and would thus be consistent with identifying this figure as a priest. But what if we assume, on the other hand, that the head on figure 3 was originally a jackal. What then? Not only do we have "representations of priests wearing masks," but we also have examples of actual masks, as well as "literary accounts from non-Egyptians about Egyptian priests wearing masks." What's more, there is at least one written account of when a priest would wear a mask. "In the midst of the embalmment ritual, a new section is introduced with the following passage: 'Afterwards, Anubis, the *stolites* priest wearing the head of this god, sits down and no lector-priest shall approach him to bind the *stolites* with any work.' Thus this text settles any questions about whether masks were actually used. It furthermore identifies the individual wearing the mask as a priest."²²

The leopard-skin robe worn by figure 3—which is not clearly depicted in the facsimile, but is undoubtedly shown on the original

20. Ritner, "Osiris-Canopus and Bes at Herculaneum," 406; compare Wilson, "Masking and Multiple Personas," 79–82, who discusses the use of masks in ritual and role playing and what that may have signified to the ancient Egyptians.

21. See further Terence DuQuesne, "Concealing and Revealing: The Problem of Ritual Masking in Ancient Egypt," *Discussions in Egyptology* 51 (2001): 5–31, esp. 14–19.

22. Gee, "Abracadabra, Isaac, and Jacob," 80–83, citations removed, emphasis in original; compare Gee, *Guide to the Joseph Smith Papyri*, 36–39; Michael D. Rhodes, "Teaching the Book of Abraham Facsimiles," *Religious Educator* 4, no. 2 (2003): 120; Nibley, *Approach to the Book of Abraham*, 34, 288, 494–95; Günther Roeder, *Die Denkmäler des Pelizaeus-Museums zu Hildesheim* (Hildesheim: Karl Curtius Verlag, 1921), 127, plate 49; and Deborah Sweeney, "Egyptian Masks in Motion," *Göttinger Miszellen* 135 (1993): 101–4. See additionally the recent study of Barbara Richter, "Gods, Priests, and Bald Men: A New Look at Book of the Dead 103 ('Being Besides Hathor')," in *The Book of the Dead, Saite through Ptolemaic Periods: Essays on Books of the Dead and Related Topics*, ed. Malcolm Mosher Jr. (Prescott, Ariz.: SPBDStudies, 2019), 519–40, who discusses the polyvalence of the terms *isz* and *ihy* as they apply to the Egyptian priesthood of Ihy/Hathor. "The word *isz* can refer to the baldness of all Egyptian priests, but it can also recall the intermediary statues of the 'bald ones of Hathor,' who relay the words of the goddess. The word *ihy* can indicate the god, who offers the deceased protection, renewal, and rejuvenation, but it can also refer to the *ihy*-priests, whose feather head-dresses in the determinatives emphasize their roles in music and dancing—a necessity for pacifying Hathor's dangerous side." Richter, "Gods, Priests, and Bald Men," 535.

papyrus—would also be consistent with identifying this figure as a priest (specifically a class called the *sem*-priest), who is “recognizable by his leopard-skin robe” and certain hairstyles. Interestingly, and perhaps significantly for Joseph Smith’s interpretation of Facsimile 1, the ritual clothing of the *sem*-priest had a clear connection to the god Anubis defeating chaos and evil, personified as the god Seth, through violence. “Papyrus Jumilhac, dating to the Ptolemaic Period (ca. 300 BC), attempts to explain the significance of the leopard skin through a myth that relates the misdeeds of the god Seth. As told in the papyrus, Seth attacked Osiris and then transformed himself into a leopard. The god Anubis defeated Seth and then branded his pelt with spots, hence the robe commemorates the defeat of Seth.”²³ Also in Papyrus Jumilhac, Anubis transforms himself into a giant snake who brandishes two flint knives.²⁴

So even if some “issues concerning the accuracy of both the artwork and the copying [of Facsimile 1]” remain unanswered at the moment (issues which, unfortunately, “are routinely clouded by shifting the responsibility of the artwork from the engraver, Reuben Hedlock, to Joseph Smith, without adducing any evidence to identify a particular individual with the responsibility for the restorations”²⁵), the identification of this figure as a priest is not outside the realm of possibility from an Egyptological perspective.

Further Reading

Gee, John. “Abracadabra, Isaac, and Jacob.” *FARMS Review of Books* 7, no. 1 (1995): 80–83.

Nibley, Hugh. *An Approach to the Book of Abraham*, edited by John Gee, 287–96, 494–95. *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.

23. Emily Teeter, *Religion and Ritual in Ancient Egypt* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 24–25.

24. P. Jumilhac 13/14–14/4, in Jacques Vandier, *Le Papyrus Jumilhac* (Paris: Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique, 1962), 125–26.

25. Gee, *Guide to the Joseph Smith Papyri*, 39.

The Purpose and Function of the Egyptian Hypocephalus

Facsimile 2 of the Book of Abraham is a type of document called a hypocephalus. “The term ‘hypocephalus’ refers to a piece of Late Period and Ptolemaic [ca. 664–30 BC] funerary equipment. It is specifically, an amuletic disc, made of cartonnage, bronze, textile, and more rarely, papyrus, or even wood, emulating a solar disc.”¹ The name was coined by modern Egyptologists beginning with Jean-François Champollion and comes from Greek, meaning literally “under the head.”² Spell 162 of the ancient Egyptian Book of the Dead specifies that these amulets were to be placed *hr tp* of the mummy, which has been widely rendered as “under the head” of the mummy.³

Today there are 158 known hypocephali that have been catalogued or published.⁴ Based on their attested chronological and geographical distribution, “it is clear that the use of the hypocephalus never became widespread” in ancient Egypt. Instead, they “remained exclusive pieces of funerary equipment reserved for the clergy and for the members of their families

1. Tamás Mekis, *The Hypocephalus: An Ancient Egyptian Funerary Amulet* (Oxford: Archaeopress, 2020), 2. Other nonround funerary objects that served a same or similar purpose to the “classic” flat disc-shaped hypocephalus have also been identified. See John Gee, “Non-round Hypocephali,” in *Aegyptus et Pannonia III: Acta Symposii anno 2004*, ed. Hedvig Győry (Budapest: Ancient Egyptian Committee of the Hungarian-Egyptian Friendship Society, 2006), 41–54.

2. Champollion used this designation based on a bilingual Greek-Egyptian papyrus in the Louvre that commanded the text be placed ὑπο τὴν κεφαλὴν (*hypo tēn kephalēn*) or “under the head.” Jean-François Champollion, *Notice descriptive des monuments Égyptiens du Musée du Charles X* (Paris: L’Imprimerie De Crapelet, 1827), 155; Mekis, *Hypocephalus*, 5 n. 5.

3. A more technically correct translation of the Egyptian phrase appears to mean “at the head” or “beside the head” of the mummy, meaning at very least in some proximity to the deceased. Gee, “Non-round Hypocephali,” 49–50.

4. These have been helpfully collected in Mekis, *Hypocephalus*.

who occupied also priestly positions in the *pallacide* of the temples,” especially the temple of Amun at Karnak, the temple of Min at Akhmim, and the temple of Ptah at Memphis.⁵ Although hypocephali themselves appear to be later creations, the mythological and cosmological conceptions contained in hypocephali have apparent forerunners in earlier Egyptian texts.⁶

According to Spell 162 of the Book of the Dead, hypocephali served a number of important purposes: to protect the deceased in the afterlife, to provide light and heat for the deceased, to make the deceased “appear again like one who is on earth” (that is, to resurrect them), and to ultimately transform the deceased into a god.⁷ Hypocephali were also conceived of (and even sometimes explicitly identified as) the magical eye of the sun god Re that consumed enemies with fire. Their circular shape and function of providing light, heat, and protection naturally lent themselves to this conceptualization in the minds of the ancient Egyptians.⁸ Because there are so many extant hypocephali with varied features that draw on often arcane or easily misunderstood aspects of ancient Egyptian myth and religion, different methodologies have been used to try to understand this type of document with sometimes very different results. “Just as the evidence left from the past often leaves itself open to multiple interpretations, so also multiple methodologies may be used to examine and analyze that evidence. The researcher must make choices about which legitimate methods to use. Different methods sometimes yield different results.”⁹ For this reason, any modern interpretation of the meaning of the figures and texts contained on hypocephali should always leave room for the possibility of a plurality of approaches.¹⁰

5. Mekis, *Hypocephalus*, 2, emphasis in original.

6. Mekis, *Hypocephalus*, 2.

7. Quote in Mekis, *Hypocephalus*, 3. For an accessible translation of Spell 162, see Michael D. Rhodes, “A Translation and Commentary of the Joseph Smith Hypocephalus,” *BYU Studies* 17, no. 3 (Spring 1977): 260–62; and Michael D. Rhodes, “The Joseph Smith Hypocephalus . . . Twenty Years Later,” unpublished manuscript, [1997], <https://www.magicgatebg.com/Books/Joseph%20Smith%20Hypocephalus.pdf>, 13–14; compare Hugh Nibley and Michael D. Rhodes, *One Eternal Round*, The 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), 224–30; and Mekis, *Hypocephalus*, 2–4.

8. Mekis, *Hypocephalus*, 31, 52–57; Rhodes, “Twenty Years Later,” 1.

9. John Gee, “The Effect of Methodological Choices on the Understanding of Hypocephali,” *Bibliotheca Orientalis* 79, nos. 1–2 (January–April 2022): 5.

10. Gee, “Effect of Methodological Choices,” esp. 7–11, provides several examples illustrating this point, including some that have direct relevance to Joseph Smith’s interpretation of Facsimile 2.

While these might perhaps have been the primary purposes of hypocephali, it is clear from the explanatory rubric of some copies of Spell 162 of the Book of the Dead and from other surviving evidence that they also served other roles. For example, hypocephali (or objects that served the same purpose as hypocephali) may have been used as divinatory devices in the Egyptian temple and as astronomical documents.¹¹ This is especially significant since Joseph Smith's interpretation of Facsimile 2 draws connections to modern temples and features several astronomical elements. Hypocephali also shared a conceptual link with temple gates. In this capacity, they served, among other things, to keep out enemies and admit friends into sacred space and shared a focus on creation motifs.¹² Furthermore, hypocephali illustrate everything that the sun encircles, including the world of the living on the top and the underworld on the bottom. In this regard, hypocephali sought to capture the aspect of the cyclical rebirth of the sun, which was conceptualized as (re)creation.¹³ Once again, this parallels Joseph Smith's explanations of Facsimile 2, which emphasize themes of creation. While hypocephali served a number of important religious and ritual purposes for the ancient Egyptians, they ultimately "point[ed] toward the Egyptians' hope in a resurrection and life after death as a divine being."¹⁴

Finally, it is noteworthy that there appear to have been ancient connections between Abraham and the hypocephalus. For example, in one Egyptian papyrus, Abraham is referred to as "the pupil of the *wedjat*-eye" and associated with the primeval creator god.¹⁵ "Moreover, in view of the representations of Amon in the centre panel of the discs, hypocephali

11. Gee, "Non-round Hypocephali," 51–54; John Gee, "Hypocephali as Astronomical Documents," in *Aegyptus et Pannonia V: Acta Symposii anno 2008*, ed. Hedvig Györy and Ádám Szabó (Budapest: Ancient Egyptian Committee of the Hungarian-Egyptian Friendship Society, 2016), 59–71.

12. John Gee, "Hypocephali and Gates," in *Aegyptus et Pannonia VI: Acta Symposii anno 2019*, ed. Hedvig Györy (Budapest: Ancient Egyptian Committee of the Hungarian-Egyptian Friendship Society, 2020), 25–36.

13. Mekis, *Hypocephalus*, 32, 40, 52, 54–56.

14. Rhodes, "Twenty Years Later," 12.

15. Quotation in John Gee, "Abraham in Ancient Egyptian Texts," *Ensign* 22, no. 7 (July 1992): 61; compare F. L. Griffith and Herbert Thompson, *The Demotic Magical Papyrus of London and Leiden* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1921), 64–65; Hans Dieter Betz, ed., *The Greek Magical Papyri in Translation: Including the Demotic Spells* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 208; and John Gee, "Abracadabra, Isaac, and Jacob," *Review of Books on the Book of Mormon* 7, no. 1 (1995): 77–80. As Gee, "Abraham in Ancient Egyptian Texts," 61, explains, "The *wedjat*-eye was a symbol of perfection, prosperity,

are properly equivalent in the Egyptian belief system with the pupil of the wedjat-eye itself.”¹⁶ Michael D. Rhodes has also drawn attention to a possible allusion to the hypocephalus in an extrabiblical text that prominently features Abraham.

The Apocalypse of Abraham describes a vision Abraham saw while making a sacrifice to God. In this vision he is shown the plan of the universe, “what is in the heavens, on the earth, in the sea, and in the abyss” (almost the exact words used in the left middle portion of the Joseph Smith Hypocephalus). He is shown “the fullness of the whole world and its circle,” in a picture with two sides. The similarity with the hypocephalus is striking. There is even a description of what are clearly the four canopic figures labeled number 6 in the Joseph Smith Hypocephalus. The significance of these documents is that they date from the beginning of the Christian era—they are roughly contemporary with the hypocephalus and the other Egyptian documents purchased by Joseph Smith—and they relate the same things about Abraham that Joseph Smith said are found in the hypocephalus and the other Egyptian papyri.¹⁷

Besides being interesting and informative in its own right, understanding the purpose and function of the ancient Egyptian hypocephalus is therefore crucial to evaluating Joseph Smith’s interpretation of Facsimile 2 and to helping readers of the Book of Abraham better appreciate why such a document might have been recontextualized by the Prophet to illustrate Abraham’s record.

Further Reading

Gee, John. “Hypocephalus.” In *The Pearl of Great Price Reference Companion*, edited by Dennis L. Largey, 161–62. Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2017.

Nibley, Hugh, and Michael D. Rhodes. *One Eternal Round*. The 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.

preservation, wholeness, completion, health, and resurrection; in Christian times it was the word the Copts used for salvation.”

16. Mekis, *Hypocephalus*, 4; compare Nibley and Rhodes, *One Eternal Round*, 332–33.

17. Rhodes, “Twenty Years Later,” 7; compare Nibley and Rhodes, *One Eternal Round*, 352–55; and Kevin L. Barney, “The Facsimiles and Semitic Adaptation of Existing Sources,” in *Astronomy, Papyrus, and Covenant*, ed. John Gee and Brian M. Hauglid (Provo, Utah: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 2005), 121–22.

Rhodes, Michael D. "The Joseph Smith Hypocephalus . . . Twenty Years Later." Unpublished manuscript, [1997]. <https://www.magicgatebg.com/Books/Joseph%20Smith%20Hypocephalus.pdf>.

———. "A Translation and Commentary of the Joseph Smith Hypocephalus." *BYU Studies* 17, no. 3 (Spring 1977): 260–62.



FIGURE 33. Hypocephalus of Tadjit (Louvre, E 6208), cartonnage drawn with black ink; Ptolemaic Period. Photograph by Stephen T. Whitlock. Courtesy Stephen T. Whitlock.



FIGURE 34. Hypocephalus of Hor (British Museum, EA 35875), textile based cartonnage drawn with black ink; Ptolemaic Period. Image from www.britishmuseum.org. © The Trustees of the British Museum. All rights reserved.



FIGURE 35. Hypocephalus of Tasheritkhonsu (British Museum, EA 37909), stuccoed linen drawn with black ink; Ptolemaic Period. Image from www.britishmuseum.org. © The Trustees of the British Museum. All rights reserved.



FIGURE 36. Hypocephalus of Iahmes (Louvre, N 3525 A), stuccoed linen drawn with black ink; Ptolemaic Period. Photograph by Stephen T. Whitlock. Courtesy Stephen T. Whitlock.



FIGURE 37. Hypocephalus of Osirer (Louvre, N 3182), stuccoed linen drawn with black ink; Ptolemaic Period. Photograph by Stephen T. Whitlock. Courtesy Stephen T. Whitlock.



FIGURE 38. Hypocephalus of Neshorpakhered (British Museum, EA 36188), stuccoed linen drawn with black ink; Ptolemaic Period. Image from www.britishmuseum.org. © The Trustees of the British Museum. All rights reserved.



FIGURE 39. Hypocephalus of Istemakhbit (Louvre, N 3524), gilded textile cartonnage with engraving; Late Period. Photograph by Stephen T. Whitlock. Courtesy Stephen T. Whitlock.



FIGURE 40. Hypocephalus of Padjiamunipt (Louvre, E 18940), cartonnage drawn with black and red ink; Ptolemaic Period. Photograph by Stephen T. Whitlock. Courtesy Stephen T. Whitlock.



FIGURE 41. Hypocephalus of Tanetirit (Rijksmuseum van Oudheden, AMS 62), cartonnage drawn with black ink; Ptolemaic Period. National Museum of Antiquities, Leiden, Netherlands; CC0 license.

One Day to a Cubit (Facsimile 2, Figure 1)

One of the more puzzling comments in the Book of Abraham comes from the explanation given in figure 1 of Facsimile 2, which speaks of “the measurement according to celestial time [of Kolob], which celestial time signifies one day to a cubit.” Latter-day Saint commentators on this passage have largely been at a loss to explain what this might mean.¹ (A cubit, after all, is a unit for measuring length, not time.²) Others have attempted to make sense of this by suggesting that “as one of Kolob’s days is a unit of celestial time, so the cubit is the unit of celestial measurement, by which the size of the worlds are measured when the foundations thereof are laid”;³ or that this describes the phenomenon of space-time;⁴ or that the text is “employing a symbolic multiplier of length parallel to the multiplier of time, whereby a day is a thousand years.”⁵

More recently, Latter-day Saint scientist Hollis R. Johnson proposed “a straightforward scientific explanation for the rather curious phrase.” According to Johnson, “It is quite possible that the phrase describes

1. See, for instance, Richard D. Draper, S. Kent Brown, and Michael D. Rhodes, *The Pearl of Great Price: A Verse-by-Verse Commentary* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2005), 290, who simply admit that they “do not know how to interpret this.”

2. The cubit was used, in both standardized and nonstandardized forms, throughout the ancient Mediterranean world, including Egypt and Canaan. See, generally, Antoine Pierre Hirsch, “Ancient Egyptian Cubits—Origin and Evolution” (PhD diss., University of Toronto, 2013); and Marvin A. Powell, “Weights and Measures,” in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. David Noel Freedman, 6 vols. (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 6:897–901.

3. George Reynolds, “The Book of Abraham—Its Genuineness Established,” *The Latter-day Saints’ Millennial Star* 41, no. 11 (March 17, 1879): 162.

4. Melvin Alonzo Cook and Melvin Garfield Cook, *Science and Mormonism: Correlations, Conflicts, and Conciliations* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1967), 57–61.

5. Samuel Brown, “The Early Mormon Chain of Belonging,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 44, no. 1 (Spring 2011): 13.

exactly the movement of the brightest celestial object, the sun, as it moves among the stars during the course of a year, a reflection of the earth's orbital motion."⁶ As Johnson noted, while the cubit was widely used in the ancient world to measure length, it was also used by some ancient astronomers to measure angles. Johnson cites a Mesopotamian text from the fourth century BC, for example, that recorded "daily positions of the moon and the planets visible above the local horizon." One translation of the text reads: "Night of the 20th, last part of the night, the moon was [nn cubi]ts below β Geminorum, the moon being $\frac{2}{3}$ cubit back to the west. The 21st, equinox; I did not watch. Ni[ght of the 22nd, last part of the night,] [the moon was] 6 cubits [below] ϵ Leonis, the moon having passed $\frac{1}{2}$ cubit behind α Leonis. Night of the 24th, clouds were in the sky."⁷

This text records the angular position of the moon relative to various stars in the constellations Gemini and Leo and records those angles in cubits. Other Mesopotamian astronomical texts calculated the position of planets the same way.⁸ "Shorter apparent distances were sometimes designated by the cubit, subdivided into 30 fingers. The cubit had an astronomical application for measuring distances in the heavens between fixed stars and the meridian, for example, or between planets and ecliptical stars, as well as for measuring eclipse magnitude."⁹ The ancient Egyptians likewise measured angles in cubits.¹⁰ So, Johnson

6. Hollis R. Johnson, "One Day to a Cubit," *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 3 (2013): 224–25.

7. Francesca Rochberg, "Natural Knowledge in Ancient Mesopotamia," in *Wrestling with Nature: From Omens to Science*, ed. Peter Harrison, Ronald L. Numbers, and Michael H. Shank (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), 18, brackets in source.

8. See the examples in Hermann Hunger and David Pingree, *Astral Sciences in Mesopotamia* (Leiden, Neth.: Brill, 1999), 160, 177, 179; compare Francesca Rochberg, *The Heavenly Writing: Divination, Horoscopy, and Astronomy in Mesopotamian Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 106, 125, 238.

9. Francesca Rochberg, "The Expression of Terrestrial and Celestial Order in Ancient Mesopotamia," in *Ancient Perspectives: Maps and Their Place in Mesopotamia, Egypt, Greece and Rome*, ed. Richard J. A. Talbert (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012), 37. Compare also Wayne Horowitz, "The 360 and 364 Day Year in Ancient Mesopotamia," *Journal of the Ancient Near Eastern Society* 24 (1996): 40, who notes that the "ideal 360 day astronomical year [attested as early as the fourth millennium BC] corresponded to an ancient Mesopotamian astronomical theory known from first millennium B.C.E. astronomical texts which held that the stars, sun, and moon moved along 360° circuits. According to this model, each day of the ideal astronomical year of 360 days corresponded to 1° of stellar or solar movement."

10. Dieter Arnold, *Building in Egypt: Pharaonic Stone Masonry* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 11–13.

argues, “the phrase *one day to a cubit* in the Book of Abraham seems to refer to *angular velocity* rather than *linear velocity*. With this changed perspective, we can readily interpret the otherwise opaque passage *one day to a cubit* as an excellent description of the motion of the sun as it passes among the stars and constellations during the course of a year.”¹¹ Using the cubit to measure this angular velocity would have been relatively easy or simple for Abraham and other ancients. “An observer, even with crude instruments, or even with the hand itself, can make simple measurements to yield angular information about objects close together in the sky—measurements in which the pointer finger at arm’s length subtends an angle of about a degree, called a ‘cubit’ by the ancients.”¹²

Of course, since the measurement of Kolob, rather than the sun, is said to be “one day to a cubit,” Johnson’s argument needs to be slightly tweaked: “With the extended perspective that a *cubit* is an angle of a degree, the curious phrase *one day to a cubit* from the Book of Abraham describes precisely the movement of [Kolob].”¹³ Overall, this rings plausible, especially since the placement of Kolob in the cosmology of Abraham 3 is relative to other observable celestial bodies (Abr. 3:9, 12–13). And if Kolob is to be identified with the dog star Sirius, as some have argued,¹⁴ this would provide a bright visible object in the night sky by which to calculate angular velocity as described by Johnson. So, while the precise meaning of “one day to a cubit” remains elusive, a reasonable interpretation of the phrase that finds precedent in the ancient world can be and indeed has been made.

Further Reading

Johnson, Hollis R. “One Day to a Cubit.” *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 3 (2013): 223–30.

11. Johnson, “One Day to a Cubit,” 227, emphasis in original.

12. Johnson, “One Day to a Cubit,” 228.

13. Johnson, “One Day to a Cubit,” 228, emphasis in original.

14. See “Kolob, the Governing One,” 142–49 herein.



FIGURE 42. The goddess Hathor depicted as a cow with a red sun disc between her horns on a wall of the mortuary temple of Hatshepsut at Deir el-Bahari. Photograph by Stephen O. Smoot.

The Hathor Cow (Facsimile 2, Figure 5)

Figure 5 in Facsimile 2 of the Book of Abraham, a figure of an upside-down cow, is identified by Joseph Smith with this elaborate explanation:

Fig. 5. Is called in Egyptian Enish-go-on-dosh; this is one of the governing planets also, and is said by the Egyptians to be the Sun, and to borrow its light from Kolob through the medium of Kae-e-vanrash, which is the grand Key, or, in other words, the governing power, which governs fifteen other fixed planets or stars, as also Floeese or the Moon, the Earth and the Sun in their annual revolutions. This planet receives its power through the medium of Kli-flos-is-es, or Hah-ko-kau-beam, the stars represented by numbers 22 and 23, receiving light from the revolutions of Kolob.

From the viewpoint of current Egyptological knowledge, some aspects of this explanation find plausible confirmation from the ancient Egyptians, while other aspects remain unconfirmed.¹ One of the elements of this explanation which finds confirmation from the ancient Egyptians is Joseph Smith's identification of this figure as the sun.²

The identity of this figure is not always easy to establish, since the ancient Egyptians represented various deities and composite-deities

1. Michael D. Rhodes, "The Joseph Smith Hypocephalus . . . Twenty Years Later," 10–11, unpublished manuscript, [1997], accessed December 20, 2022, <https://www.magicgatebg.com/Books/Joseph%20Smith%20Hypocephalus.pdf>; 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), 290–99.

2. John Gee, "Hypocephali as Astronomical Documents," in *Aegyptus et Pannonia V: Acta Symposii anno 2008*, ed. Hedvig Györy and Ádám Szabó (Budapest: Ancient Egyptian Committee of the Hungarian-Egyptian Friendship Society, 2016), 61–64; "Book of Abraham, Facsimiles Of," in *Pearl of Great Price Reference Companion*, ed. Dennis L. Largey (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2017), 58.

with bovine features,³ and because not all hypocephali consistently feature this figure.⁴ Thankfully, however, this figure is featured in some hypocephali and labeled with hieroglyphs often enough to make identifying it not impossible. The name given to this figure in some hypocephali is that of the goddess Hathor (*ḥwt-ḥr*).⁵ Additional names sometimes given to this figure are Ihet (*ih̄t/šht*) and Mehet-Weret (*mḥt-wrt*), who are both cow goddesses “commonly identified with Isis or Hathor.”⁶ Although this figure is not labeled in the hypocephalus reproduced as Facsimile 2, it is safe to assume that it is very likely the cow goddess Hathor or one of her closely associated divine emanations.

One of the “most important and popular” goddesses in ancient Egypt, Hathor took on many roles and characteristics over the course of her worship during prehistoric times in Egypt all the way down to the Roman Period some three thousand years later. “She was most commonly represented as a cow goddess. Her manifestations and associated activities were numerous and diverse, and complementary aspects such as love and hate, or creation and destruction, characterized her from the earliest stages of her worship.” What’s more, “her aspects [also] incorporated animals, vegetation, the sky, the sun, trees, and minerals, and she governed over the realms of love, sex, and fertility, while also maintaining a vengeful aspect capable of the destruction of humanity.” When represented as a cow or as a human female with cow horns, she “usually bears the sun disk between [her] horns.”⁷

This last detail, though small, is significant for Joseph Smith’s interpretation of this figure. Hathor, especially in her bovine form, is frequently but not necessarily always identified in Egyptian texts as the mother and guardian of the sun disc as it is reborn each morning.⁸ She is sometimes

3. Geraldine Pinch, *Handbook of Egyptian Mythology* (Santa Barbara, Calif.: ABC-CLIO, 2002), 123–26; Richard H. Wilkinson, *The Complete Gods and Goddesses of Ancient Egypt* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 2003), 170–75.

4. Tamás Mekis, *The Hypocephalus: An Ancient Egyptian Funerary Amulet* (Oxford: Archaeopress, 2020), 49–52.

5. Mekis, *Hypocephalus*, 49 n. 312.

6. Pinch, *Egyptian Mythology*, 125, 137; Mekis, *Hypocephalus*, 49 n. 312, 57; Rhodes, “Twenty Years Later,” 10–11; Elena Pischikova, “‘Cow Statues’ in Private Tombs of Dynasty 26,” in *Servant of Mut: Studies in Honor of Richard A. Fazzini*, ed. Sue H. D’Auria (Leiden, Neth.: Brill, 2008), 191.

7. Deborah Vischak, “Hathor,” in *The Ancient Gods Speak: A Guide to Egyptian Religion*, ed. Donald B. Redford (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 157.

8. Mekis, *Hypocephalus*, 55–57, discusses the identity of this cow figure in hypocephali and the standing figure with an encircled *wedjat*-eye for its head that often appears behind the cow holding a lotus or other object (as it does in Facsimile 2). According to

identified as both the consort and daughter of Re, the sun god, and is frequently identified as “Eye of Re.” She is featured prominently in one myth involving the sun god Re where she devours enemies with a fiery solar glare from her eyes(s).⁹

That the goddess Hathor had an unmistakable solar component among her various divine identities and functions is recognized widely among Egyptologists.¹⁰ “Hathor was closely connected with the sun god Re whose disk she wears,” writes Richard Wilkinson. “Thus, Hathor played an important role in the royal sun temples of the later Old Kingdom, and her mythological relationship with the sun god was firmly established. As the ‘Golden One’ she was the resplendent goddess who accompanied the sun god on his daily journey in the solar barque.”¹¹

By the likely time Facsimile 2 was drawn, Hathor was being identified by some ancient Egyptians as not only the mother and protector of the sun disc but as the sun itself. “Like her companion, the sun god Re, Hathor [was sometimes identified as] a fiery solar deity.”¹² One inscription from the Hathor Temple at Dendera makes this identification explicit: “[The goddess] Keket . . . praises Hathor of the sun: . . . ‘Hail to you, Female Sun, Mistress of Suns’” (*ind hr.t rꜥyt ḥnwt n(.t) rꜥw*).¹³ Commenting on this text, Egyptologist Barbara Richter explains,

The [play on words] on the root *rꜥ*, “sun,” first as the feminine singular substantive *rꜥyt*, “Female Sun,” and then as the plural substantive *rꜥw*, “suns,” emphasizes not only that Hathor is the sun, but also that she is mistress of all other solar deities. Furthermore, because Keket [is a goddess who] represents [primordial] darkness, it is appropriate that she praises Hathor as the “Female Sun,” the bringer of light. . . . The text, iconography, and imagery of [this] scene [in the temple] allude to Hathor as the rising sun at its first illumination of the earth.¹⁴

Mekis, the Celestial Cow could be the personification of a variety of goddesses, including Nut and Neith but also Hathor and Mehet-Weret, while the standing figure “is one of the typical night forms of the sun-god” (55).

9. François Daumas, “Hathor,” in *Lexikon der Ägyptologie*, ed. Wolfgang Helck and Eberhard Otto (Wiesbaden, Ger.: Otto Harrassowitz, 1977), 2:1026.

10. For a representative summary of the Egyptological consensus, see Pinch, *Egyptian Mythology*, 137–38.

11. Wilkinson, *Complete Gods and Goddesses of Ancient Egypt*, 140.

12. Alison Roberts, *Hathor Rising: The Power of the Goddess in Ancient Egypt* (Rochester, Vt.: Inner Traditions International, 1995), 8.

13. Barbara A. Richter, *The Theology of Hathor of Dendera: Aural and Visual Scribal Techniques in the Per-Wer Sanctuary* (Atlanta: Lockwood Press, 2016), 167.

14. Richter, *Theology of Hathor of Dendera*, 167.

At the temple of Esna, this cow figure is identified as Ihet and described as follows:

The very great cow, who gives birth to her children through her rites, the guardian of her houses who creates the two encirclers in her form of the golden cow, the great horizon, which lifts up the two lights [the sun and the moon] in her belly: she has driven out darkness and brought light. She has lit up Egypt by what came forth from her. She is the divine mother of Re [the sun god], who created light through her creation, who created what exists after her creation, who caused Orion to sail the southern heaven after her, who sealed the dipper in the northern heaven before her. She is [the goddess of the sky] Nut who carries the stars pertaining thereto with her orbit, who strings the bow, so that the decans [stars] tread in her place.¹⁵

The imagery in this inscription depicts “a golden cow who bears or creates the two *encirclers* (*dbnyw*) or two *great lights* (*hꜣyti*) being the sun and moon. . . . These drive out darkness, bring in light, and lighten the land. She is also connected with the stars, fixing them in their places and orbits. . . . She is explicitly connected with the horizon, but at the same time, since ‘she has driven out darkness, and she has lit up Egypt’ she is identified with the sun. Thus this figure is horizon, sky, and sun.”¹⁶ There is nothing obvious in figure 5 of Facsimile 2 that lends itself to being identifiable as the sun to somebody who is idly speculating about what it might mean. So, while not all of Joseph Smith’s explanation of this figure currently finds immediate confirmation, the fact that at least one important element of his explanation does find confirmation from the ancient Egyptians indicates that the Prophet was doing something more than simply guessing.

Further Reading

Nibley, Hugh, and Michael D. Rhodes. *One Eternal Round*, 290–99. The 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.

15. Translation in Gee, “Hypocephali as Astronomical Documents,” 61. For the hieroglyphic text, see Serge Sauneron, *Le Temple D’Esna (Nos 399–472): Text* (Cairo: L’Institut Français d’Archéologie Orientale, 1969), 58–59. Compare the translation offered in Alexandra von Lieven, *Der Himmel über Esna* (Wiesbaden, Ger.: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2000), 144–45.

16. Gee, “Hypocephali as Astronomical Documents,” 62, emphasis in original.

The Four Sons of Horus (Facsimile 2, Figure 6)

Figure 6 of Facsimile 2 of the Book of Abraham was interpreted straightforwardly by Joseph Smith as “represent[ing] this earth in its four quarters.”¹ Based on contemporary nineteenth-century usage of this biblical idiom (Rev. 20:8), Joseph Smith evidently meant the figures represent the four cardinal points (north, east, south, and west).² This interpretation finds ready support from the ancient Egyptians.

The four entities in figure 6 represent the four sons of the god Horus: Hapi, Imsety, Duamutef, and Qebehsenuf.³ Over the span of millennia of Egyptian religion, these gods took on various forms as well as mythological roles and aspects.⁴ One such role was, indeed, as representing the

1. “A Fac-simile from the Book of Abraham, No. 2.,” *Times and Seasons* 3, no. 10 (March 15, 1842): insert between pages 720 and 721.

2. See George Stanley Faber, *A General and Connected View of the Prophecies, Relative to the Conversion, Restoration, Union, and Future Glory of the Houses of Judah and Israel* (London: F. C. and J. Rivington, 1808), 2:84; Robert Hodgson, *The Works of the Right Reverend Beilby Porteus, D.D., Late Bishop of London*, 6 vols. (London: G. Sidney, 1811), 5:218; Matthew Henry, *An Exposition of the Old and New Testament*, 6 vols. (Philadelphia: Towar, J. & D. M. Hogan, 1831), 6:931; Noah Webster, *An American Dictionary of the English Language* (New York: S. Converse, 1828), s.v. “quarter”; William L. Roy, *A New and Original Exposition on the Book of Revelation* (New York: D. Fanshaw, 1848), 97; William Henry Scott, *The Interpretation of the Apocalypse and Chief Prophetical Scriptures Connected with It* (London: Longman, Brown, Green, and Longmans, 1853), 185–86; and Peter Canvan, “The Earth, as We Find It,” *Saints’ Herald* 20, no. 5 (March 1, 1873): 139.

3. Michael D. Rhodes, “A Translation and Commentary of the Joseph Smith Hypocephalus,” *BYU Studies* 17, no. 3 (1977): 272–73; Michael D. Rhodes, “The Joseph Smith Hypocephalus . . . Twenty Years Later,” 11, unpublished manuscript, [1997], accessed December 20, 2022, <https://www.magicgatebg.com/Books/Joseph%20Smith%20Hypocephalus.pdf>; Tamás Mekis, *The Hypocephalus: An Ancient Egyptian Funerary Amulet* (Oxford: Archaeopress, 2020), 49 n. 310, 53–54.

4. For an overview, see John Gee, “Notes on the Sons of Horus,” FARMS Report (1991).

four cardinal directions. “By virtue of its association with the cardinal directions,” observes one Egyptologist, “four is the most common symbol of ‘completeness’ in Egyptian numerological symbolism and ritual repetition.”⁵ As another Egyptologist has summarized,

The earliest reference to these four gods is found in the Pyramid Texts [ca. 2350–2100 BC] where they are said to be the children and also the “souls” of [the god] Horus. They are also called the “friends of the king” and assist the deceased monarch in ascending into the sky (PT 1278–79). The same gods were also known as the sons of Osiris and were later said to be members of the group called “the seven blessed ones” whose job was to protect the netherworld god’s coffin. Their afterlife mythology led to important roles in the funerary assemblage, particularly in association with the containers now traditionally called canopic jars in which the internal organs of the deceased were preserved. . . . The group may have been based on the symbolic completeness of the number four alone, but they are often given geographic associations and hence became a kind of “regional” group. . . . The four gods were sometimes depicted on the sides of the canopic chest and had specific symbolic orientations, with Imsety usually being aligned with the south, Hapy with the north, Duamutef with the east and Qebesenuf with the west.⁶

This understanding is shared widely among Egyptologists today. James P. Allen, in his translation and commentary on the Pyramid Texts, simply identifies the four Sons of Horus as “representing the cardinal directions.”⁷ Manfred Lurker explains that “each [of the sons of Horus] had a characteristic head and was associated with one of the four cardinal points of the compass and one of the four ‘protective’ goddesses” associated therewith.⁸ Geraldine Pinch concurs, writing, “[The four Sons of Horus] were the traditional guardians of the four canopic jars used to hold mummified organs. Imsety generally protected the liver, Hapy the lungs, Duamutef the stomach, and Qebesenuf the intestines. The four sons were also associated with the four directions (south, north, east, and west) and with four vital components for survival after death:

5. Robert Kriech Ritner, *The Mechanics of Ancient Egyptian Magical Practice* (Chicago: Oriental Institute, 1993), 162 n. 750.

6. Richard H. Wilkinson, *The Complete Gods and Goddesses of Ancient Egypt* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 2003), 88.

7. James P. Allen, trans., *The Ancient Egyptian Pyramid Texts*, ed. Peter Der Manu-elian (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2005), 433.

8. Manfred Lurker, *An Illustrated Dictionary of the Gods and Symbols of Ancient Egypt* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1980), 37–38.

the heart, the *ba*, the *ka*, and the mummy.”⁹ “They were the gods of the four quarters of the earth,” remarks Michael D. Rhodes, “and later came to be regarded as presiding over the four cardinal points. They also were guardians of the viscera of the dead, and their images were carved on the four canopic jars into which the internal organs were placed.”¹⁰ Yet another Egyptologist, Maarten J. Raven, argues that the *primary* purpose of the sons of Horus was to act as “the four corners of the universe and the four supports of heaven, and only secondarily with the protection of the body’s integrity.”¹¹

The association of the Sons of Horus with the earth’s cardinal directions is explicit in one scene where, represented “as birds flying out to the four corners of the cosmos,” they herald the accession of king Ramses II to the throne:¹²

Imsety, go south that you may declare to the southern gods that Horus, [son of] Isis and Osiris, has assumed the crown and the King of Upper and Lower Egypt, Usermaatse Setepenre [Ramses II], has assumed the crown; Hapi, go north that you declare to the northern gods that Horus, [son of] Isis and Osiris, has assumed the crown and the King of Upper and Lower Egypt, Usermaatse Setepenre [Ramses II], has assumed the crown; Duamutef, go east that you may declare to the eastern gods that Horus, [son of] Isis and Osiris, has assumed the crown and the King of Upper and Lower Egypt, Usermaatse Setepenre [Ramses II], has assumed the crown; Qebehsenuef, go west that you may declare to the western gods that Horus, [son of] Isis and Horus, has assumed the

9. Geraldine Pinch, *Handbook of Egyptian Mythology* (Santa Barbara, Calif.: ABC-CLIO, 2002), 204.

10. Rhodes, “Translation and Commentary,” 272–73.

11. Maarten J. Raven, “Egyptian Concepts on the Orientation of the Human Body,” *Journal of Egyptian Archaeology* 91 (2005): 52. As Raven elaborates, “Two conflicting orientation systems can be observed. The Sons of Horus can either occupy corner positions on coffins or canopic chests (Amset in the north-east, Hapy north-west, Duamutef south-east, and Qebehsenuef south-west; both pairs change places in the New Kingdom), or they are represented on the four side walls (Amset south, Hapy north, Duamutef east, and Qebehsenuef west). In the latter case, the corner positions are often taken by four protective goddesses. Obviously, the notions of the corners of the universe and of the four points of the compass were not clearly distinguished.”

12. Raven, “Egyptian Concepts on the Orientation of the Human Body,” 42. See also Hans Bonnet, *Reallexikon der ägyptischen Religionsgeschichte* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1952), 315; Matthieu Heerma van Voss, “Horuskinder,” in *Lexikon der Ägyptologie*, ed. Wolfgang Helck and Eberhard Otto (Wiesbaden, Ger.: Harrassowitz, 1980), 3:53.

crown and the King of Upper and Lower Egypt, Usermaatre Setepenre [Ramses II], has assumed the crown.¹³

While Joseph Smith's succinct interpretation of figure 6 in Facsimile 2 might have left out some additional details we know about the Sons of Horus (whose roles evolved over the span of Egyptian religious history), it nevertheless converges nicely with current Egyptological knowledge.¹⁴

Further Reading

Gee, John. "Notes on the Sons of Horus." FARMS Report (1991).

Nibley, Hugh, and Michael D. Rhodes. *One Eternal Round*, 299–302. The 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.

13. *The Epigraphic Survey, Medinet Habu, Volume 4: Festival Scenes of Ramses III* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1940), plate 213, translation modified from Gee, *Notes on the Sons of Horus*, 60.

14. Hugh Nibley and Michael D. Rhodes, *One Eternal Round*, The 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), 299–302; Gee, "Hypocephali as Astronomical Documents," 66–67.

God Sitting upon His Throne (Facsimile 2, Figure 7)

Figure 7 in Facsimile 2 is identified as follows: “Represents God sitting upon his throne, revealing through the heavens the grand Key-words of the Priesthood; as, also, the sign of the Holy Ghost unto Abraham, in the form of a dove.” Appearing in several other ancient Egyptian hypocephali,¹ the sitting personage in figure 7 has been described by one Egyptologist as “a polymorphic god sitting on his throne” with “his back [in] bird-form, while one of his arms is raised like that of [the gods] Min or [Amun] and hold[ing] forth a flagellum.” Standing next to him is a “falcon- or snake-headed snake” believed to perhaps be the minor deity Nehebkau, who “offers the wedjat-eye.”²

Another Egyptologist has similarly described this figure as “a seated ithyphallic god with a hawk’s tail, holding aloft a flail. This is a form of Min . . . perhaps combined with Horus, as the hawk’s tail would seem to indicate. Before the god is what appears to be a bird presenting him with a Wedjat-eye.”³ In some hypocephali, the ancient Egyptians themselves simply identified this figure as, variously, “the great god” (*ntr ʿ3*), the “Lord of Life” (*nb ʿnh*), or the “Lord of All” (*nb r dr*).⁴ This first epithet is significant for Joseph Smith’s interpretation, since in one ancient

1. Tamás Mekis, *The Hypocephalus: An Ancient Egyptian Funerary Amulet* (Oxford: Archaeopress, 2020), 49–52.

2. Mekis, *Hypocephalus*, 51–52.

3. Michael D. Rhodes, “The Joseph Smith Hypocephalus . . . Twenty Years Later,” 11, unpublished manuscript, [1997], accessed December 20, 2022, <https://www.magicgatebg.com/Books/Joseph%20Smith%20Hypocephalus.pdf>.

4. John Gee, “Towards an Interpretation of Hypocephali,” in “*Le Lotus Qui Sort de Terre*”: *Mélanges Offerts À Edith Varga*, ed. Hedvig Györy (Budapest: Bulletin du Musée Hongrois des Beaux-Arts, 2001), 334; Mekis, *Hypocephalus*, 51 n. 317.

Egyptian text the divine figure Iaho Sabaoth (Lord of Hosts) is also afforded the epithet “the Great God” (*pꜣ ntr ꜥꜣ*).⁵

Since some Egyptologists have suggested this figure is the god Min or Amun, who was often syncretized with Min,⁶ it would be worth exploring what we know about this deity, even if this identification wasn’t explicitly made by the ancient Egyptians themselves. One of Egypt’s oldest gods, Min was worshipped as early as the Pre-Dynastic Period (pre-3000 BC). Although he assumed multiple attributes over millennia,⁷ Min is perhaps best known as “the god of the regenerative, procreative forces of nature”⁸—that is, as a sort of fertility god who was often depicted as the premier manifestation of “male sexual potency.”⁹ He is frequently shown raising his arm to the square while holding a flail (symbols or gestures associated with kingship), displaying power and the ability to protect from enemies.¹⁰

Min is also very often, though not always,¹¹ depicted in hypocephali with an erect phallus (ithyphallic), which Egyptologists have interpreted as either a symbol of, on the one hand, sexual potency, fertility, (pro) creation, and rejuvenation, or, on the other hand, aggression, power, and authority.¹² One Egyptologist has also interpreted depictions of Min with his raised arm and erect phallus as a sign of him being “a protector

5. John Gee, “The Structure of Lamp Divination,” in *Acts of the Seventh International Conference of Demotic Studies, Copenhagen, 23–27 August 1999*, ed. Kim Ryholt (Copenhagen: Carsten Niebuhr Institute of Near Eastern Studies, University of Copenhagen, 2002), 211–12.

6. Christian Leitz, ed., *Lexikon der ägyptischen Götter und Götterbezeichnungen* (Leuven: Peeters, 2002), 3:290–91.

7. Leitz, *Lexikon der ägyptischen Götter und Götterbezeichnungen*, 3:288–91.

8. Rhodes, “Twenty Years Later,” 11.

9. Eugene Romanosky, “Min,” in *The Ancient Gods Speak: A Guide to Egyptian Religion*, ed. Donald B. Redford (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 218.

10. Leitz, *Lexikon der ägyptischen Götter und Götterbezeichnungen*, 3:288; Jorge Ogdon, “Some Notes on the Iconography of the God Min,” *Bulletin of the Egyptological Seminar* 7 (1985/6): 29–41; Romanosky, “Min,” 219; Toby Wilkinson, *Early Dynastic Egypt* (London: Routledge, 1999), 161; Manfred Lurker, *An Illustrated Dictionary of the Gods and Symbols of Ancient Egypt* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1980), 52; Richard H. Wilkinson, *Symbol and Magic in Egyptian Art* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1994), 196; compare Richard H. Wilkinson, *The Complete Gods and Goddesses of Ancient Egypt* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 2003), 115; and Richard H. Wilkinson, “Ancient Near Eastern Raised-Arm Figures and the Iconography of the Egyptian God Min,” *Bulletin of the Egyptological Seminar* 11 (1991–2): 109–18.

11. Mekis, *Hypocephalus*, 50.

12. Ogdon, “Some Notes on the Iconography of the God Min,” 29–41; Joachim Quack, “The So-Called Pantheos: On Polymorphic Deities in Late Egyptian Religion,” in

of the temple” whose role was “to repulse negative influences from the ‘profane surroundings’” of the sacred space of the temple.¹³

That Min would assume the roles of divine procreator who gives life and divine king who upholds the cosmos is understandable from the viewpoint of ancient Egyptian religion.¹⁴ As Ian Shaw explains,

Although Egyptian art shied away from depicting the sexual act, it had no such qualms about the depiction of the erect phallus. . . . The three oldest colossal religious statues in Egyptian history, found by [William Flinders] Petrie in the earliest strata of the temple of Min at Koptos . . . were essentially large ithyphallic representations, probably of Min. . . . This celebration of the phallus appears to be directly related to the Egyptians’ concerns with the creation (and sustaining) of the universe, in which the king was thought to play a significant role—which was no doubt one of the reasons why the Egyptian state would have been concerned to ensure that the ithyphallic figures continued to be important elements of many cults.¹⁵

Christina Riggs similarly comments that “near-naked goddesses, gods with erections, and cults for virile animals, like bulls, make sense in [ancient Egyptian] religious imagery because they captured the miracle of life creating new life.”¹⁶ For this reason Min was “regarded as the creator god *par excellence*” in ancient Egypt, as fertility and (male) sexuality was “subsumed under the general notion of creativity.”¹⁷

Figure 7 in Facsimile 2 was either originally drawn or copied somewhat crudely (without access to the original hypocephalus it is impossible to tell), and so it is not entirely clear if the seated figure is ithyphallic

Aegyptus et Pannonia III: Acta Symposii anno 2004, ed. Hedvig Györy (Budapest: Comité de l'Égypte Ancienne de l'Association Amicale Hongroise-Égyptienne, 2006), 176.

13. Ogdon, “Some Notes on the Iconography of Min,” 35.

14. Min was often syncretized with both Horus and Amun, two gods closely associated with kingship, and himself bore the epithet “Min the King.” Leitz, *Lexikon der ägyptischen Götter und Götterbezeichnungen*, 3:290–91.

15. Ian Shaw, *Ancient Egypt: A Very Short Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 133.

16. Christina Riggs, *Ancient Egyptian Art and Architecture: A Very Short Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 89.

17. K. Van der Toorn, ed., “Min,” in *Dictionary of Deities and Demons in the Bible*, ed. Karel van der Toorn, Bob Becking, and Pieter W. van der Horst, 2nd ed. (Leiden, Neth.: Brill, 1999), 557, emphasis in original. This can be further seen in the Pyramid Texts, which explicitly link male sexual virility with the creation of the cosmos (in this case the birth of Shu and Tefnut from the primordial creator god Atum). Pyramid Text (PT) 475 in James Allen, trans., *The Ancient Egyptian Pyramid Texts*, ed. Peter Der Manuelian (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2005), 164.

or if he has one arm at his side with the other arm clearly raised in the air. Although Egyptologists have tended to interpret figure 7 in Facsimile 2 as ithyphallic—and that *seems* to be how it is depicted—it should be kept in mind, as noted above, that Min is not always depicted as such in hypocephali, so he need not *necessarily* be viewed as ithyphallic in Facsimile 2.

But what about the figure assumed to be Nehebkau offering Min the *wedjat*-eye?¹⁸ Depicted most commonly as a snake or snake-headed man¹⁹—but sometimes as a falcon (as in Facsimile 2)²⁰—in chapter 125 of the Book of the Dead, Nehebkau is named as one of the judges of the dead.²¹ In chapter 149 of the Book of the Dead, he is associated with Min and other deities as one who ensures that the dead will be rejuvenated and resurrected with a perfected body.²² In the Pyramid Texts, he feeds the deceased king and acts as a divine messenger.²³ As such, he “was considered to be a provider of life and nourishment.”²⁴ Together “Nehebkau and Min were symbolic of life-force and procreative forces of nature.”²⁵

In ancient Egyptian, the word *wḏ* carries the meaning of “hale, uninjured,” and also “well-being.”²⁶ It can describe the health or wholeness of the physical body, the soul, or moral character.²⁷ At the time of the creation of the Joseph Smith hypocephalus, the word meant “whole or complete” and “perfect,” and featured in ritual contexts where an individual’s heart was proclaimed to be *wḏ* when the words of the ritual were “spoken exactly” (meaning the ritual was properly executed).²⁸

18. Alan W. Shorter, “The God Nehebkau,” *Journal of Egyptian Archaeology* 21, no. 1 (1935): 41–48; Wilkinson, *Complete Gods and Goddesses*, 224–25.

19. Wilkinson, *Complete Gods and Goddesses*, 224; Leitz, *Lexikon der ägyptischen Götter und Götterbezeichnungen*, 4:274.

20. Mekis, *Hypocephalus*, 52 n. 319; Leitz, *Lexikon der ägyptischen Götter und Götterbezeichnungen*, 4:274.

21. Raymond O. Faulkner, trans., *The Ancient Egyptian Book of the Dead* (London: British Museum Press, 2010), 32; Karl Richard Lepsius, *Das Todtenbuch der Ägypter nach dem hieroglyphischen Papyrus in Turin mit einem Vorworte zum ersten Male Herausgegeben* (Leipzig, Ger.: G. Wigand, 1842), plate XLVII.

22. Faulkner, *Ancient Egyptian Book of the Dead*, 137; Lepsius, *Das Todtenbuch der Ägypter*, plate LXXI.

23. PT 187 and PT 365 in Allen, *Ancient Egyptian Pyramid Texts*, 78, 230.

24. Rhodes, “Twenty Years Later,” 12.

25. Luca Miatello, “The Hypocephalus of Takerheb in Firenze and the Scheme of the Solar Cycle,” *Studien zur Altägyptischen Kultur* 37 (2008): 285.

26. Raymond O. Faulkner, *A Concise Dictionary of Middle Egyptian* (Oxford: Griffith Institute, 1991), 74–75; compare Rainer Hannig, *Großes Handwörterbuch Ägyptisch-Deutsch (2800–950 v. Chr.)* (Mainz, Ger.: Verlag Philipp von Zabern, 1997), 231–32.

27. Adolf Erman and Hermann Grapow, *Wörterbuch der ägyptischen Sprache* (Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1958), 1:399–400.

28. Penelope Wilson, *A Ptolemaic Lexicon* (Leuven: Peeters, 1997), 283.

The *wedjat*-eye Nehebkau presents to Min (or vice-versa in some hypocephali) was thus envisioned by the ancient Egyptians as the “whole” or “sound” eye of the god Horus and had an apotropaic function in ancient Egyptian religion.²⁹ In Ptolemaic temple inscriptions, the word is used for the purpose of “saving and protecting . . . the body, or being saved in the temple,”³⁰ and in one Demotic creation text the phrase *di wdʒ* denotes “something the creator god does to the gods while eternally rejuvenating them, a usage reflected in prayers for mortal individuals.” Accordingly, it appears in the temple graffiti of petitioners requesting divine blessings.³¹ The *wedjat*-eye was, in short, “the symbol of all good gifts”³² and divine blessings, and thus a symbol for “the miracle of [the] restoration” and renewal of the body.³³ Among Coptic Christians, the word *wdʒ* (Ⲡⲩⲁⲓ) meant “salvation, saved” in the soteriological sense in addition to the mundane sense of “healthy, whole.”³⁴ This fuller understanding helps make sense of Joseph Smith’s interpretation of this figure and situates such in an ancient Egyptian context.³⁵

Further Reading

Nibley, Hugh, and Michael D. Rhodes. *One Eternal Round*, 304–22. The 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.

Rhodes, Michael D., “The Joseph Smith Hypocephalus . . . Twenty Years Later.” Unpublished manuscript, [1997]. <https://www.magicgatebg.com/Books/Joseph%20Smith%20Hypocephalus.pdf>.

29. Geraldine Pinch, *Handbook of Egyptian Mythology* (Santa Barbara, Calif.: ABC-CLIO, 2002), 131–32.

30. John Gee, “Some Neglected Aspects of Egypt’s Conversion to Christianity,” in *Coptic Culture: Past, Present and Future*, ed. Mariam Ayad (Stevenage, U.K.: Coptic Orthodox Church Centre; Oxford: Oxbow Books, 2012), 51–52.

31. Gee, “Some Neglected Aspects of Egypt’s Conversion,” 52.

32. Rhodes, “Twenty Years Later,” 11.

33. Hugh Nibley and Michael D. Rhodes, *One Eternal Round*, The 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), 314.

34. Wolfhart Westendorf, *Koptisches Handwörterbuch* (Heidelberg: Carl Winter Universitätsverlag, 1977), 287; Richard Smith, *A Concise Coptic-English Lexicon*, 2nd ed. (Atlanta: Scholar’s Press, 1999), 39; Gee, “Some Neglected Aspects of Egypt’s Conversion to Christianity,” 49–54, esp. 51–52.

35. See also Nibley and Rhodes, *One Eternal Round*, 304–22.

Facsimile 3: Judgment Scene or Presentation Scene?

Facsimile 3 of the Book of Abraham has been identified in the past as “a constantly recurring scene in Egyptian literature, best known from the 125th chapter of the *Book of the Dead*. It represents the judgment of the dead before the throne of Osiris.”¹ Based on comparable iconography from other Egyptian funerary texts, this understanding of Facsimile 3 has been prevalent among Egyptologists.² “The formal judgment of the dead contained in BD spell 125 . . . involves the deceased supplicant making a ‘negative confession’ asserting his or her faultless behavior on earth in the presence of forty-two gods assembled in the Hall of the Two Truths, while the heart is weighted against the feather of Maat.”³ This judgment scene very frequently is depicted as transpiring before the presence of the god Osiris, who is often shown sitting on a throne accompanied by his sisters/wives Isis and Nephthys.

1. Michael D. Rhodes, “Facsimiles from the Book of Abraham,” in *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, ed. Daniel H. Ludlow, 4 vols. (New York: Macmillan, 1992), 1:136.

2. See, for instance, F. S. Spalding, *Joseph Smith, Jr., as a Translator* (Salt Lake City: Arrow Press, [1912]), 24, 26; and Robert K. Ritner, *The Joseph Smith Egyptian Papyri: A Complete Edition, P. JS 1–4 and the Hypocephalus of Sheshonq* (Salt Lake City: Smith-Pettit Foundation, 2011), 138. Klaus Baer opined in 1968 that Facsimile 3 was “a scene [that] comes from a mortuary papyrus and is similar to, but not identical with scenes showing the judgment of the deceased before Osiris” in Book of the Dead Spell 125. Klaus Baer, “The Breathing Permit of Hôr: A Translation of the Apparent Source of the Book of Abraham,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 3, no. 3 (Fall 1968): 126.

3. Peter F. Dorman, “The Origins and Early Development of the Book of the Dead,” in *Book of the Dead: Becoming God in Ancient Egypt*, ed. Foy Scalf (Chicago: Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago, 2017), 39.

Although this interpretation of Facsimile 3 has become commonplace, objections might nevertheless be raised.⁴ “The problems with the theory that Facsimile 3 is the vignette from Book of the Dead 125 can be most readily shown” by the fact that many of the essential elements needed for a judgment scene are missing in Facsimile 3.⁵ One copy of the Book of the Dead from the first century AD—broadly contemporaneous to the Joseph Smith Papyri⁶—describes what appears to have been considered the “normative” version of a judgment scene for that time period:

The forty-two gods [in front of] the deceased above the hall of the truths; a figure of Hathor, [lady] of the underworld carrying a *was*-scepter, protecting the man, while the two arms of the scale are straight and Thoth is on its left, to the right of its [. . .] while Horus speaks, and Anubis grasps it on the side on which are the two truths (Maats) while he is opposite on the other side of the scale. Thoth reads the writings since a scroll is in his hand [. . . Ammut] in whose hand is a knife and before whom are a sword and a scepter, Anubis holding his hand. A lotus with two supports on which are the four sons of Horus. A chapel in which Osiris sits on his throne there being an offering table with a lotus before him. Isis is behind him praising, and Nephthys is behind him praising.⁷

When this description is compared with Facsimile 3, several problems of comparison with Book of the Dead 125 appear.

Facsimile 3 lacks the forty-two gods. It is missing Hathor holding the *was*-scepter. There is no balance-scale. Thoth is missing from the left side of the nonexistent scale. Horus is missing. The figure generally

4. John Gee, “Facsimile 3 and Book of the Dead 125,” in *Astronomy, Papyrus, and Covenant*, ed. John Gee and Brian M. Hauglid, Studies in the Book of Abraham 3 (Provo, Utah: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 2005), 95–105.

5. Gee, “Facsimile 3 and Book of the Dead 125,” 99.

6. See “What Egyptian Papyri Did Joseph Smith Possess?,” 13–28 herein, and “The Ancient Owners of the Joseph Smith Papyri,” 201–5 herein.

7. Gee, “Facsimile 3 and Book of the Dead 125,” 100, citing P. Bibliothèque Nationale 149 1/16–24, in Franz Lexa, *Das demotische Totenbuch der Pariser Nationalbibliothek (Papyrus des Pamonthes)* (Leipzig, Ger.: Hinrichs, 1910), 6–8, plate 1; compare Martin Andreas Stadler, *Der Totenpapyrus des Pa-Month (P. Bibli. nat. 149)*, Studien zum Alt-ägyptischen Totenbuch 6 (Wiesbaden, Ger.: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2003), 29–30, 182; Mark Smith, *Traversing Eternity: Texts for the Afterlife from Ptolemaic and Roman Egypt* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 446–47; and John Gee, “A New Look at the *ḥḥ p3* by Formula,” in *Actes du IXe congrès international des études démotiques, Paris, 31 août–3 septembre 2005*, ed. Ghislaine Widmer and Didier Devauchelle (Paris: Institut Français D’Archéologie Orientale, 2009), 139–40. Note that Gee, Lexa, Smith, and Stadler all differ in some parts of their respective readings of the Demotic text.

identified with Anubis is not grasping the side of the scale, but the waist of the man. Since Thoth is not depicted, he cannot be shown reading anything. Ammut is absent, along with the knife, sword, and scepter. The lotus is missing the four sons of Horus atop it. Though Osiris is shown sitting, he is not depicted seated within any chapel. Almost all of the elements which the Egyptians thought were important for the scene are conspicuous by their absence from Facsimile 3. Significantly, these elements are present in a vignette accompanying Book of the Dead, chapter 125, found among the Joseph Smith Papyri, as well as other copies of vignettes of Book of the Dead, chapter 125. These elements are present in all the judgment scenes that the critics would compare with the Facsimile 3. The elements of the judgment scene as listed in the Demotic Book of the Dead are consistent with those of earlier judgment scenes. Their absence from Facsimile 3 indicates that Facsimile 3 is not a judgment scene and is not directly associated with Book of the Dead 125.⁸

While it is true that not all ancient Egyptian judgment scenes in the centuries-long tradition of the Book of the Dead are universally consistent in what they visually depict, when enough elements are missing it might be reasonably asked whether the illustration in question is in fact a judgment scene at all. Furthermore, the fact that Facsimile 3 was part of the Book of Breathings and not the Book of the Dead also raises the question of whether comparing it to chapter 125 from the Book of the Dead is the right approach in the first place. It is partly for these reasons that Quinten Barney has recently performed a study of Facsimile 3 in which he compared it with similar throne scenes depicting the god Osiris from the other extant copies of the Book of Breathings.⁹ Barney categorized four types of throne scenes (invocation, weighing of the heart, presentation, and hybrid) from the Book of Breathings and compared them with Facsimile 3.¹⁰ After careful comparison, Barney concluded that while “Facsimile No. 3 does have much in common with those various throne scenes found in these texts, including those scenes from the Book of Breathings, . . . several challenges present themselves as we begin to try classifying the Facsimile into one of the four categories of throne scenes presented above.”¹¹

8. Gee, “Facsimile 3 and Book of the Dead 125,” 100–101.

9. Quinten Zehn Barney, “The Neglected Facsimile: An Examination and Comparative Study of Facsimile No. 3 of *The Book of Abraham*” (master’s thesis, Brigham Young University, 2019).

10. Barney, “Neglected Facsimile,” 70–88.

11. Barney, “Neglected Facsimile,” 81.

In fact, when compared with other throne scenes from the Book of Breathings, Facsimile 3 contains several anomalous artistic elements that are not standard in other illustrations, and its placement on the papyrus scroll obtained by Joseph Smith (not at the commencement of the text but at least two columns in) is likewise not standard for this type of text. So, while “the type of scene with which Facsimile No. 3 compares best is that of the Presentation scene, which features the deceased being introduced into the presence of Osiris by one or more other Egyptian deities. . . . There are several challenges with placing Facsimile No. 3 into this category.”¹²

If Facsimile 3 is indeed closer to a presentation scene than a judgment scene, then it might have a plausible connection with astronomy. “Parallel scenes on Egyptian temples are explicitly labeled as initiations. Known initiation rituals from Greco-Roman Egypt include instruction in astronomy as part of the initiation.”¹³ This converges with Joseph Smith’s interpretation that this scene depicts Abraham “reasoning upon the principles of Astronomy, in the king’s court.” Until further work can shed more light on this fascinating but complex matter, we will have to be content for now that “although Facsimile No. 3 was attached to the *Hor Book of Breathings*, it is anything but a common funerary scene from that collection of texts.”¹⁴

Further Reading

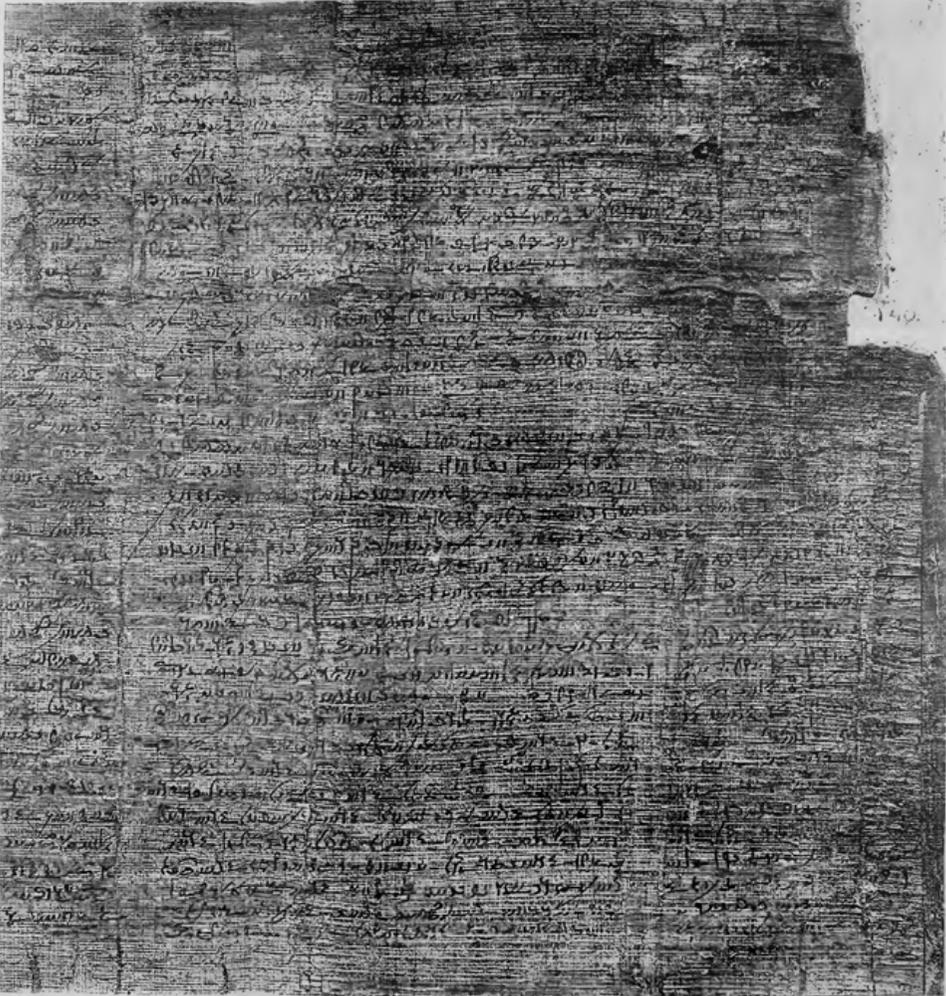
Barney, Quinten. “The Neglected Facsimile: An Examination and Comparative Study of Facsimile No. 3 of *The Book of Abraham*.” Master’s thesis, Brigham Young University, 2019.

Gee, John. “Facsimile 3 and Book of the Dead 125.” In *Astronomy, Papyrus, and Covenant*, compiled and edited by John Gee and Brian M. Hauglid, 95–105. Studies in the Book of Abraham 3. Provo, Utah: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 2005.

12. Barney, “Neglected Facsimile,” 81.

13. John Gee, *An Introduction to the Book of Abraham* (Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2017), 153.

14. Barney, “Neglected Facsimile,” 88. See also Hugh Nibley, “All the Court’s a Stage: Facsimile 3, a Royal Mummying,” in *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), 382–465.



Papyrus des Pamonthes (Dem. Totb.)
Kolumne 1

Vorlag: J. C. Heisch, Leipzig.

Lichtdruckanstalt Eb. Drecherl, Strassburg 95.

FIGURE 43. Column I of the Demotic Book of the Dead of Pamonthes (Bibliothèque Nationale 149), AD 63, containing a written description of the judgment scene from Book of the Dead 125. From Lexa (1910), plate I.

I.

1 ...
2 ...
3 ...
4 ...
5 ...
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7 ...
8 ...
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10 ...
11 ...
12 ...
13 ...
14 ...
15 ...
16 ...
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33 ...
34 ...
35 ...
36 ...
37 ...

Papyrus des Pamoethes (Dem. Totb.)
Kolumne 1

FIGURE 44. Drawn rendering of column I of the Demotic Book of the Dead of Pamoethes (Bibliothèque Nationale 149), AD 63. From Lexa (1910), plate Ia.

Abraham and Osiris (Facsimile 3, Figure 1)

Figure 1 of Facsimile 3 of the book of Abraham was interpreted by Joseph Smith as “Abraham sitting upon Pharaoh’s throne, by the politeness of the king, with a crown upon his head, representing the Priesthood, as emblematical of the grand Presidency in Heaven; with the scepter of justice and judgment in his hand.” This interpretation has clashed with those offered by Egyptologists, who have instead identified the figure as the god Osiris.¹ What’s more, two Egyptologists have claimed to arrive at this interpretation from reading the hieroglyphs to the right of figure 1.²

Robert Ritner (2011)

dd-mdw i(n) Wsir hnty-imnty.w nb (?)
sbḏw(?) ntr ʿs r d.t nhḥ (?)

Recitation by Osiris, Foremost of the Westerners, Lord of Abydos(?), the great god forever and ever(?).

Michael Rhodes (2002)

dd-mdw i(n) Wsir hnty-imnty.w mn=k,
Wsir, Hr m ns.t ʿs.t=f

Words spoken by Osiris, the Foremost of the Westerners: May you, Osiris Hor, abide at the side of the throne of greatness.

One of these Egyptologists has attempted to reproduce the hieroglyphs accompanying figure 1.³ A comparison of his reproduction and Reuben Hedlock’s original, however, reveals some difficulties.

1. See, for instance, Klaus Baer, “The Breathing Permit of Hôr: A Translation of the Apparent Source of the Book of Abraham,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 3, no. 3 (Fall 1968): 126; and Michael D. Rhodes, *The Hor Book of Breathings: A Translation and Commentary*, Studies in the Book of Abraham 2, ed. John Gee (Provo, Utah: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 2002), 23.

2. Robert K. Ritner, *The Joseph Smith Egyptian Papyri: A Complete Edition, P. JS 1–4 and the Hypocephalus of Sheshonq* (Salt Lake City: Smith-Pettit Foundation, 2011), 139; Rhodes, *Hor Book of Breathings*, 25.

3. Rhodes, *Hor Book of Breathings*, 24.



FIGURE 45. A side-by-side comparison of the hieroglyphs that appear next to figure 1 in Facsimile 3 in the May 16, 1842, issue of the *Times and Seasons* (left) and the reconstructed hieroglyphs by Rhodes (2002), 24 (right). © Intellectual Reserve, Inc. Courtesy of the Church History Library, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

For example, some of the glyphs in the name of Osiris in the first column on the right only bear general resemblance to attested spellings of Osiris’s name in other copies of the Book of Breathings, and other glyphs that make up the rest of the name and epithets for Osiris look quite different as well.⁴ “These issues combine to suggest that the translation of the characters may not be as straightforward as has been previously assumed,”⁵ so “while one can see good reasons for . . . the use of parallel texts” to reconstruct illegible characters in Facsimile 3, it is also necessary to be aware of difficulties or uncertainties in reading the hieroglyphs in Hedlock’s copy of Facsimile 3.⁶

Nevertheless, the identity of this figure as Osiris appears reasonable based on comparable iconography. One might therefore rightly ask how

4. Quinten Zehn Barney, “The Neglected Facsimile: An Examination and Comparative Study of Facsimile No. 3 of *The Book of Abraham*” (master’s thesis, Brigham Young University, 2019), 45, 121–22.

5. Barney, “Neglected Facsimile,” 49.

6. Barney, “Neglected Facsimile,” 45. Ritner’s hesitation in his reading of the hieroglyphs in Facsimile 3, as well as the multiple disagreements with Rhodes’s own reading of the same, further indicates the difficulty in reading these glyphs.

or even if it is possible to reconcile Joseph Smith's identification of this figure as Abraham.

In 1981, Latter-day Saint scholar Blake T. Ostler drew attention to possible Egyptian connections between the figures of Osiris and Abraham.⁷ In his study, Ostler cited the work of an earlier non-Latter-day Saint German scholar drawing parallels between the parable of Lazarus and the rich man in Luke 16:19–31 and an Egyptian text known as the tale of Setne.⁸ As summarized more recently by another Latter-day Saint scholar, in the Egyptian text, a boy named Si-Osiris (“son of Osiris”) and his father witness “two funerals: first, that of a rich man, shrouded in fine linen, loudly lamented and abundantly honored; then, that of a poor man, wrapped in a straw mat, unaccompanied and unmourned. The father says that he would rather have the lot of the rich man than that of the pauper.”⁹ To show his father the folly of his thinking, Si-Osiris takes him to the underworld, where the rich man who had an elaborate funeral is punished while the pauper who had no dignified burial is glorified and exalted in the presence of the god Osiris himself. “The reason for this disparate treatment is that, at the judgment, the good deeds of the pauper outweighed the bad, but with the rich man the opposite was true.”¹⁰

Some scholars have argued for a Jewish borrowing and adaptation of the tale of Setne that made its way into the Gospel of Luke. Egyptologist Miriam Lichtheim introduces her translation of the tale of Setne by commenting on the “genuinely Egyptian motifs” of the nobleman who is tortured in the netherworld while the poor man is deified in the afterlife. These motifs, she insists, “formed the basis for the parable of Jesus in Luke 16:19–31, and for the related Jewish legends, preserved in many variants in Talmudic and medieval Jewish sources.”¹¹

7. Blake T. Ostler, “Abraham: An Egyptian Connection,” FARMS Report (1981).

8. Ostler, “Abraham,” 3–8, citing Hugo Gressmann, *Vom reichen Mann und armen Lazarus: Eine literargeschichtliche Studie* (Berlin: Verlag der Königl. Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1918).

9. Kevin L. Barney, “The Facsimiles and Semitic Adaptation of Existing Sources,” in *Astronomy, Papyrus, and Covenant*, ed. John Gee and Brian M. Hauglid (Provo, Utah: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 2005), 120–21.

10. Barney, “Facsimiles and Semitic Adaptation of Existing Sources,” 121.

11. Miriam Lichtheim, *Ancient Egyptian Literature: A Book of Readings, Volume III: The Late Period* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), 126; compare Robert K. Ritner, “The Adventures of Setna and Si-Osire (Setna II),” in *The Literature of Ancient*



FIGURE 46. The god Osiris, seated and holding a crook, flail, and scepter (symbols of kingship), as well as the symbol for life (*ankh*). From behind he is embraced and protected by his sister-wife Isis. Relief in the tomb of Khaemhat (TT 57) from the reign of the Eighteenth Dynasty king Amenhotep III (c. 1390–1352 BC). Photograph by Stephen O. Smoot.

Another scholar has further explored the parallels between these two traditions and notes how Lazarus being exalted in “the bosom of Abraham” in Luke’s retelling of the parable is very likely a Jewish refashioning of the imagery in the tale of Setne of the poor beggar being found exalted by the throne of Osiris. In his words, “‘Abraham’ must be a Jewish substitute for the pagan god Osiris. . . . He is the very seat of divine authority” in the parable, “for he was originally the lord of Amnte, Osiris.”¹² Even the name Lazarus is likely the Greek rendering of the Hebrew-Aramaic “God-helped-(him),” which “points back toward an Egyptian original with similar meaning: ‘Osiris-helps-him,’ for instance.”¹³ As explained by Kevin Barney, “We are able to see how the Egyptian story has been transformed in Semitic dress. . . . The ‘bosom of Abraham’ [from the Lucan parable] represents Amnte, the Egyptian abode of the dead. And, most remarkably, Abraham is a Jewish substitute for the pagan god Osiris—just as is the case in Facsimiles 1 and 3.”¹⁴

There appears to be another instance of the biblical figure Abraham anciently being associated with the Egyptian god Osiris. An Egyptian funerary formula found in several sources was later syncretized with Jewish figures in its later renderings into Greek and Coptic. The short Demotic version of the formula reads: “May his soul live in the presence of Osiris-Sokar, the great god, lord of Abydos.” In Greek this formula was rendered as “rest his soul in the bosom of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob.” In this reformulation, “the expression ‘live in the presence of Osiris’ has been replaced by the expression ‘rest in Abraham’s bosom.’”¹⁵

We cannot know exactly why Abraham was viewed by some anciently as a substitute for the Egyptian god Osiris.¹⁶ Whatever the case, “there

Egypt: An Anthology of Stories, Instructions, Stelae, Autobiographies, and Poetry, ed. William Kelly Simpson, 3rd ed. (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2003), 470–71.

12. K. Grobel, “. . . Whose Name Was Neves,” *New Testament Studies* 10, no. 3 (1964): 380.

13. Grobel, “. . . Whose Name Was Neves,” 381.

14. Barney, “Facsimiles and Semitic Adaptation of Existing Sources,” 121.

15. John Gee, “A New Look at the *‘nh p3* by Formula,” in *Actes du IXe congrès international des études démotiques, Paris, 31 août–3 septembre 2005*, ed. Ghislaine Widmer and Didier Devauchelle (Paris: Institut Français D’Archéologie Orientale, 2009), 133, 143.

16. It should be noted that the ancient association between Abraham and Osiris is not the only attested instance of Judeo-Egyptian syncretization. As Gary Rendsburg has pointed out, “the biblical writer utilized the venerable Horus myth in order to present Moses as the equal to Pharaoh.” As seen in many parallels between the two figures, “the young Moses [in the biblical account] is akin to the young Horus, the latter a mythic equal of the living Pharaoh.” Gary A. Rendsburg, “Moses as Equal to Pharaoh,” in *Text*,

are enough instances where Abraham appears in contexts normally occupied by Osiris that we must conclude the Egyptians saw some sort of connection.”¹⁷ It is especially noteworthy, as seen above, that Abraham appears as a substitute for Osiris in ways associated with the judgment of the dead or a postmortem declaration of the deceased’s worthiness. This in turn might shed some light on what might otherwise appear as Joseph Smith’s incongruous interpretation of this figure in Facsimile 3.

Further Reading

- Barney, Kevin L. “The Facsimiles and Semitic Adaptation of Existing Sources.” In *Astronomy, Papyrus, and Covenant*, compiled and edited by John Gee and Brian M. Hauglid, 107–30. Studies in the Book of Abraham 3. Provo, Utah: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 2005.
- Ostler, Blake T. “Abraham: An Egyptian Connection.” FARMS Report (1981).

Artifact, and Image: Revealing Ancient Israelite Religion, ed. Gary Beckman and Theodore J. Lewis (Providence: Brown University, Brown Judaic Studies, 2010), 208.

17. Kerry Muhlestein, “Abraham, Isaac, and Osiris-Michael: The Use of Biblical Figures in Egyptian Religion, a Survey,” in *Achievements and Problems of Modern Egyptology: Proceedings of the International Conference Held in Moscow on September 29–October 2, 2009*, ed. Galina A. Belova (Moscow: Russian Academy of Sciences, Center for Egyptological Studies, 2009), 251.

Isis the Pharaoh (Facsimile 3, Figure 2)

The explanation given for Facsimile 3 identifies figure 2 as “King Pharaoh, whose name is given in the characters above his head.” One potential way to identify this figure by Egyptological methods would be to read “the characters [hieroglyphs] above his head.” Unfortunately, the original illustration or vignette from the papyrus is not extant, and so we are forced to decipher the glyphs as they are reproduced in Facsimile 3 by their engraver Reuben Hedlock. While Hedlock appears to have done a fairly commendable job accurately reproducing the facsimiles (at least based on a comparison of Facsimile 1 with the extant original papyrus), he also made some noticeable mistakes.¹ So the first issue at hand in resolving the question of the identity of this figure would be to determine how legible these glyphs actually are.

In fact, a number of Egyptologists who have examined Facsimile 3 have lamented that the hieroglyphs reproduced by Hedlock were partially or entirely illegible,² “leaving them to rely upon comparable scenes from other texts to provide their interpretations of the figures.”³ The only

1. For instance, Hedlock positioned figure 3 in Facsimile 1 behind figures 2 and 4, whereas in the original illustration figure 3 is positioned between figures 2 and 4.

2. Thus, William Flinders Petrie, “The inscriptions are far too badly copied to be able to read them,” and John Peters, “The hieroglyphics which should describe the scenes, however, are merely illegible scratches, the imitator not having the skill or intelligence to copy such a script.” F. S. Spalding, *Joseph Smith, Jr., as a Translator* (Salt Lake City: Arrow Press, [1912]), 24, 28. Compare the comments in Klaus Baer, “The Breathing Permit of Hôr: A Translation of the Apparent Source of the Book of Abraham,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 3, no. 3 (Fall 1968): 127 nn. 109–10.

3. Quinten Zehn Barney, “The Neglected Facsimile: An Examination and Comparative Study of Facsimile No. 3 of *The Book of Abraham*” (master’s thesis, Brigham Young University, 2019), 26.



FIGURE 47. A side-by-side comparison of the hieroglyphs that appear next to figure 2 in Facsimile 3 in the May 16, 1842, issue of the *Times and Seasons* (left) and the reconstructed hieroglyphs by Rhodes (2002), 24 (right). Image of Facsimile 3 © Intellectual Reserve, Inc. Courtesy Church History Library, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

two Egyptologists who have tried in print to read the hieroglyphs above figure 2 render them as follows:⁴

Robert Ritner (2011)

ss.t wr.t mw.t ntr

“Isis the great, the god’s mother.”

Michael Rhodes (2002)

Is.t wr.t mw.t ntr

“The great Isis, mother of the god.”

Ritner does not provide a hieroglyphic transcription for his reading, while Rhodes does. A careful comparison of the glyphs as reproduced by Hedlock and Rhodes, however, reveals some difficulties.⁵ The most noticeable difference is in the top three glyphs, which form the name Isis. These glyphs were either poorly preserved by Hedlock or poorly drawn by the original ancient Egyptian scribe (it is impossible to tell without the original papyrus fragment), making them effectively illegible. What Egyptologists such as Rhodes (and, it would appear, Ritner) have done is reconstruct and read these glyphs how they think they *ought* to be read (as the name of Isis), as opposed to how they *actually* stand in the preserved facsimile.⁶ So while this figure could with good reason be identified as Isis

4. Robert K. Ritner, *The Joseph Smith Egyptian Papyri: A Complete Edition, P. JS 1-4 and the Hypocephalus of Sheshonq* (Salt Lake City: Smith-Pettit Foundation, 2011), 139; Michael D. Rhodes, *The Hor Book of Breathings: A Translation and Commentary*, Studies in the Book of Abraham 2, ed. John Gee (Provo, Utah: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 2002), 25.

5. “A Fac-simile from the Book of Abraham. No. 3,” *Times and Seasons* 3, no. 14 (May 16, 1842): 783; Rhodes, *Hor Book of Breathings*, 24.

6. As one Egyptologist has recognized, this can be “a dangerous procedure when one is trying to use the names to prove something.” Baer, “Breathing Permit of Hóir,” 127 n. 110.

based on similar iconographic elements found in comparable scenes,⁷ the identity of this figure cannot be securely reached based solely on reading the poorly preserved hieroglyphs. The identification of this figure as Isis is therefore worth exploring, but there are reasons for this identification to be accepted cautiously.

At first glance, this appears problematic for Joseph Smith's interpretation of this figure, since, as seen above, scholars identify this figure as the goddess Isis (or sometimes the goddess Hathor, who was often syncretized with Isis⁸), not the Egyptian Pharaoh. If we assume that this identification is correct, a closer look at the attributes and epithets ascribed to the goddess Isis during the time Facsimile 3 was drawn reveals that this identification actually has some justification.

As the mother of the god Horus, who was the godly manifestation of Pharaoh, Isis had long been recognized as the royal mother and the king's wife by the ancient Egyptians. "She was most commonly shown as a woman wearing the throne symbol that helps to write her name. As the 'throne goddess,' she was the mother of each Egyptian king."⁹ By virtue of her royal associations and because of her extensive worship throughout the Mediterranean world,¹⁰ by the time of the Joseph Smith Papyri, Isis had come to be identified as the Pharaohess¹¹ of Egypt. In one text from this time period, for example, she is called "the Pharaohess of the whole land" (*pr-ꜥꜣt nt tꜣ r-dr=f*).¹² Of her additional dozens of epithets and titles, she was also designated, among other things, "ruler of the two lands in the house of joy" (*ḥkꜣt tꜣwy m ḥwt ꜣwt-ib*),¹³ "ruler of gods and goddesses" (*ḥkꜣt nꜥꜣrw nꜥꜣrw*),¹⁴ "the Pharaoh(ess) of everything" (*pr-ꜥꜣt nt tm nb*),¹⁵

7. See the discussion in Barney, "Neglected Facsimile," 63–88.

8. Hugh Nibley, *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), 425–32.

9. Geraldine Pinch, *Handbook of Egyptian Mythology*, Handbooks of World Mythology (Santa Barbara, Calif.: ABC-CLIO, 2002), 149; compare L. Kákosy, "Isis Regina," in *Studia Aegyptiaca I: Recueil d'études dédiées à Vilmos Wessetzky à l'occasion de son 65e anniversaire*, ed. L. Kákosy and E. Gaál (Budapest: Eötvös Loránd Tudományegyetem, 1974), 221–30.

10. R. E. Witt, *Isis in the Ancient World* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1971); Barbara S. Lesko, *The Great Goddesses of Egypt* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1999), 155–202.

11. The Egyptian word translated here is feminine.

12. Christian Leitz, ed., *Lexikon der ägyptischen Götter und Götterbezeichnungen*, 8 vols. (Leuven, Belg.: Peeters, 2002), 3:40; 8:29.

13. Leitz, *Lexikon der ägyptischen Götter und Götterbezeichnungen*, 5:551; 8:30.

14. Leitz, *Lexikon der ägyptischen Götter und Götterbezeichnungen*, 5:545–46; 8:30.

15. Leitz, *Lexikon der ägyptischen Götter und Götterbezeichnungen*, 3:40; 88:30.

“the queen who seizes office by her decree” (*nswt itī izwt m šhrw=s*),¹⁶ “excellent ruler” (*ḥkꜣt mnḥt*),¹⁷ “excellent queen” (*nswt mnḥt*),¹⁸ “excellent ruler on the throne of her father” (*ḥkꜣt mnḥt ḥr nst it=s*),¹⁹ “ruler of Egypt” (*ḥkꜣt nt bꜣkt*),²⁰ and “queen of all Egypt” (*nswt nt snwt r ꜣw=s*).²¹

Epithets such as these were routinely given to the reigning monarch, whether male or female, and inasmuch as Isis’s name in Egyptian literally means “throne” or “seat,” her shared identity with the office of the pharaoh is not at all surprising. “As the presumed embodiment of the ‘seat of the throne,’ [Isis] is in a special way bound to kingship and thus to the political aspect of [the king’s] divine nature; her role as mother of Horus and sister-wife of Osiris binds her even more closely into the Egyptian kingship, in which the living King Horus [the Pharaoh] embodies.”²² Accordingly, “with the idea of the Great Lady [Isis] actually” personifying the throne, and thereby the Egyptian kingship, “the incongruity of [Joseph Smith’s identification of] figure 2 [in Facsimile 3] as ‘King Pharaoh’ begins to dissolve.”²³

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16. Leitz, *Lexikon der ägyptischen Götter und Götterbezeichnungen*, 4:347; 8:30.

17. Leitz, *Lexikon der ägyptischen Götter und Götterbezeichnungen*, 5:543–44; 8:30.

18. Leitz, *Lexikon der ägyptischen Götter und Götterbezeichnungen*, 4:348; 8:30.

19. Leitz, *Lexikon der ägyptischen Götter und Götterbezeichnungen*, 5:544; 8:30.

20. Leitz, *Lexikon der ägyptischen Götter und Götterbezeichnungen*, 5:542; 8:30.

21. Leitz, *Lexikon der ägyptischen Götter und Götterbezeichnungen*, 4:348; 8:30.

22. “Als mutmaßliche Verkörperung des ‚Thronsitzes‘ ist sie dem Königtum und damit dem politischen Aspekt göttlichen Wesens sogar in besonderer Weise verbunden; ihre Rolle als Mutter des Horus und Schwester-Gattin des Osiris bindet sie denn ja auch aufs engste in das ägyptische Königtum ein, in dem der lebende König Horus verkörpert . . . eingeht.” Siegfried Morenz, “Vorträge und Referate (Ausführliche Fassung) Ägyptische Nationalreligion und sogenannte Isismission,” *Zeitschrift der Deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft* 111, no. 2 (1961): 434, translation ours. Compare Jan Bergman, “Isis” in *Lexikon der Ägyptologie*, ed. Wolfgang Helck and Eberhard Otto (Wiesbaden, Ger.: Harrassowitz, 1980), 3:186–87.

23. Nibley, *Abraham in Egypt*, 429.

Shulem, One of the King's Principal Waiters (Facsimile 3, Figure 5)

Figure 5 in Facsimile 3 of the Book of Abraham is identified as “Shulem, one of the king’s principal waiters.” We don’t know anything more about the man Shulem beyond this brief description because he does not appear in the text of the Book of Abraham. Presumably, if we had more of the story, we would know more about how he fit in the overall Abrahamic narrative. However, there are some things we can say about Shulem and his title “the king’s principal waiter.”

First is Shulem’s name. This name is “widely attested in Semitic languages” from the time of Abraham.¹ This includes attestations in Old Akkadian, Old Assyrian, Old Babylonian, Middle Babylonian, Eblaite, and Ugaritic.² Additionally, Shulem’s title “the king’s principal waiter” is arguably attested in ancient Egypt. In particular, the title “butler of the ruler” (*wḏpw n ḥkꜣ*) is a fairly close match to “the king’s principal waiter” and is attested during the time of Abraham.³

But what would a Semite like Shulem be doing in the royal court of Egypt, as depicted in Facsimile 3? In fact, there is evidence of Asiatic migration into Egypt during the time of Abraham. “A number of Asiatics residing in Egypt are also observed in texts dating to [the time of Abraham],” observes one scholar. “They list Asiatic retainers, dancers, singers, and other workers. . . . They further point to the presence of institutions for the coordination of relations between Asiatics and the local population. As some Asiatics bear Semitic names, it is likely that Levantines were still migrating into Egypt at this time.”⁴ After Abraham’s day, “in the Rammeside

1. John Gee, “Shulem, One of the King’s Principal Waiters,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 19 (2016): 383.

2. Gee, “Shulem,” 383–84.

3. Gee, “Shulem,” 385–87.

4. For a collection and summary of the relevant evidence, see Anna-Latifa Mourad, *Rise of the Hyksos: Egypt and the Levant from the Middle Kingdom to the Early*

period a number of Canaanites rose to prominence in the Egyptian palace administration, and the position of 'royal butler' was a popular career path in this respect.⁵ It could be that Shulem is at least one instance of this trend predating the later Rammeside period.

In fact, the Egyptian "Fourteenth Dynasty was 'a local dynasty of Asiatic origin in the north-eastern Delta' who are notable as 'kings with foreign, mostly West Semitic, names.'⁶ Once again, not only the names of the rulers but also members of elite households show signs of Semitic origin during this time.⁷ "So from Shulem's name and title . . . we can surmise the following: From the form of his name, [it would appear] that Shulem lived during the late Middle Kingdom or the Second Intermediate Period [ca. 1800–1600 BC]. Shulem was [likely] not a native Egyptian. He was probably a first generation immigrant. He [likely] served in the court of a Fourteenth Dynasty ruler, who was probably not a native Egyptian either."⁸ This evidence reinforces the overall historical plausibility of the Book of Abraham and may help make sense of Joseph Smith's identification of this figure in Facsimile 3.

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5. Sparks, "Canaan in Egypt," 44.

6. Gee, "Shulem," 384, quoting K. S. B. Ryholt, *The Political Situation in Egypt during the Second Intermediate Period c. 1880–1550 B.C.* (Copenhagen: Carsten Niebuhr Institute of Near Eastern Studies, 1997), 94, 99; compare Marc Van De Mieroop, *A History of Ancient Egypt* (Chichester, U.K.: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), 132; Kathryn A. Bard, *An Introduction to the Archaeology of Ancient Egypt*, 2nd ed. (West Sussex: Wiley Blackwell, 2015), 216.

7. Gee, "Shulem," 384–85; compare Barry J. Kemp, *Ancient Egypt: Anatomy of a Civilization*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2006), 28–29; Kerry Muhlestein, "Levantine Thinking in Egypt," in *Egypt, Canaan, and Israel: History, Imperialism, Ideology, and Literature*, ed. S. Bar, D. Kahn, and J. J. Shirley (Leiden, Neth.: Brill, 2011), 206–8; James K. Hoffmeier, "Egyptian Religious Influences on the Early Hebrews," in *Did I Not Bring Israel Out of Egypt? Biblical, Archaeological, and Egyptological Perspectives on the Exodus Narratives*, ed. James K. Hoffmeier, Alan R. Millard, and Gary A. Rendsburg (Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 2016), 9–10; and Garry J. Shaw, *War and Trade with the Pharaohs: An Archaeological Study of Ancient Egypt's Foreign Relations* (Barnsley, U.K.: Pen and Sword Archaeology, 2017), 49–51.

8. Gee, "Shulem," 387.

Conclusion

Ask the Right Questions and Keep Looking

As the preceding has shown, the Book of Abraham is an inexhaustible source of exploration and critical investigation, and the work of scholarly examination into this book shows no signs of slowing. On the contrary, we see multiple welcoming avenues for additional study. The net result of this review, in the meantime, has been the (re)discovery of numerous points of convergence between the Book of Abraham and the ancient world and theological and narrative aspects of the book that invite more sustained investigation. We hope that our guide has been helpful in orienting readers on these and related matters pertaining to the Book of Abraham and that it suggests some ways in which we might make progress.

There is still much that we do not know when it comes to how precisely Joseph Smith translated the Book of Abraham. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints itself takes no official position on this point other than to affirm that the translation was accomplished by the gift and power of God (something we, the authors, also affirm). There are also remaining questions surrounding Joseph Smith's explanations of the facsimiles and the ancient world of Abraham. This guide does not presume to answer all the questions people have had or may yet have about the Book of Abraham, its contents, and the manner of its translation. We freely acknowledge that the tools of scholarship at this time do not confirm every claim made in or about the Book of Abraham, and we emphasize that the various lines of evidence explored in this treatment do not somehow "prove" the Book of Abraham is true. We are, of course, well aware of the controversy that still surrounds the Book of Abraham, and we do not presume that this offering has once and for all settled the debate. But what we have seen nevertheless does help us plausibly situate the Book of Abraham in the ancient environment from whence

it purports to derive, informs how we might approach the text going forward, and positively affects our evaluation of Joseph Smith's claims to prophetic inspiration. Just as intellectual honesty demands we acknowledge the remaining gaps in our understanding and the ways in which the Book of Abraham still lacks verification based on available evidence, so too does it demand that this positive evidence not be overlooked, ignored, dismissed out of hand, or downplayed, even if it is inconvenient for certain worldviews and ideological commitments.

Although it should be evident that we tend to favor certain theories over others when it comes to explaining the nature and translation of the Book of Abraham, we do not presume to impose our understanding on others as an article of faith. We are happy to acknowledge that Latter-day Saints can in good faith come to different conclusions about the nature of this book of scripture and "pursue a faithful study of the Book of Abraham from different backgrounds and approaches."¹ In fact, we welcome these different approaches and encourage a multitude of voices to contribute to the conversation.

We also cheerfully embrace what Hugh Nibley articulated some time ago as an important strategy for any careful reader of the Book of Abraham. As Nibley so memorably expressed it, the key to approaching the Book of Abraham, or any other scriptural work, for that matter, is to ask the right questions and keep looking.² Future discoveries may bolster, qualify, or even undermine some of the points we have raised in this volume. This special issue of *BYU Studies Quarterly*, like every other work of scholarship, has a shelf life and will one day need updating or replacement. But this we welcome, because we are confident that future generations of disciple-scholars asking the right questions and answering those questions with the best available evidence will provide an even better case for the Book of Abraham than what we have offered at this time with what we currently know.

1. Robin Scott Jensen, Kerry Muhlestein, and Scott C. Esplin, "Discussing Difficult Topics: The Book of Abraham," *Religious Educator* 21, no. 3 (2020): 117.

2. Hugh Nibley, "The Facsimiles of the Book of Abraham: A Response," in *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), 499.

Appendix: Book of Abraham Bibliography

The following bibliography on the Book of Abraham has been modified and expanded from that found at www.pearlofgreatpricecentral.org. The purpose of this bibliography is to assemble a variety of works on the Book of Abraham written primarily by or for Latter-day Saints. This bibliography is not exhaustive and does not include more specialized academic literature. Instead, it has been curated with the intent of highlighting works that are more readily accessible to average Latter-day Saint readers. Most of these items can be accessed online by following the hyperlinks collected at Pearl of Great Price Central for the convenience of the reader.

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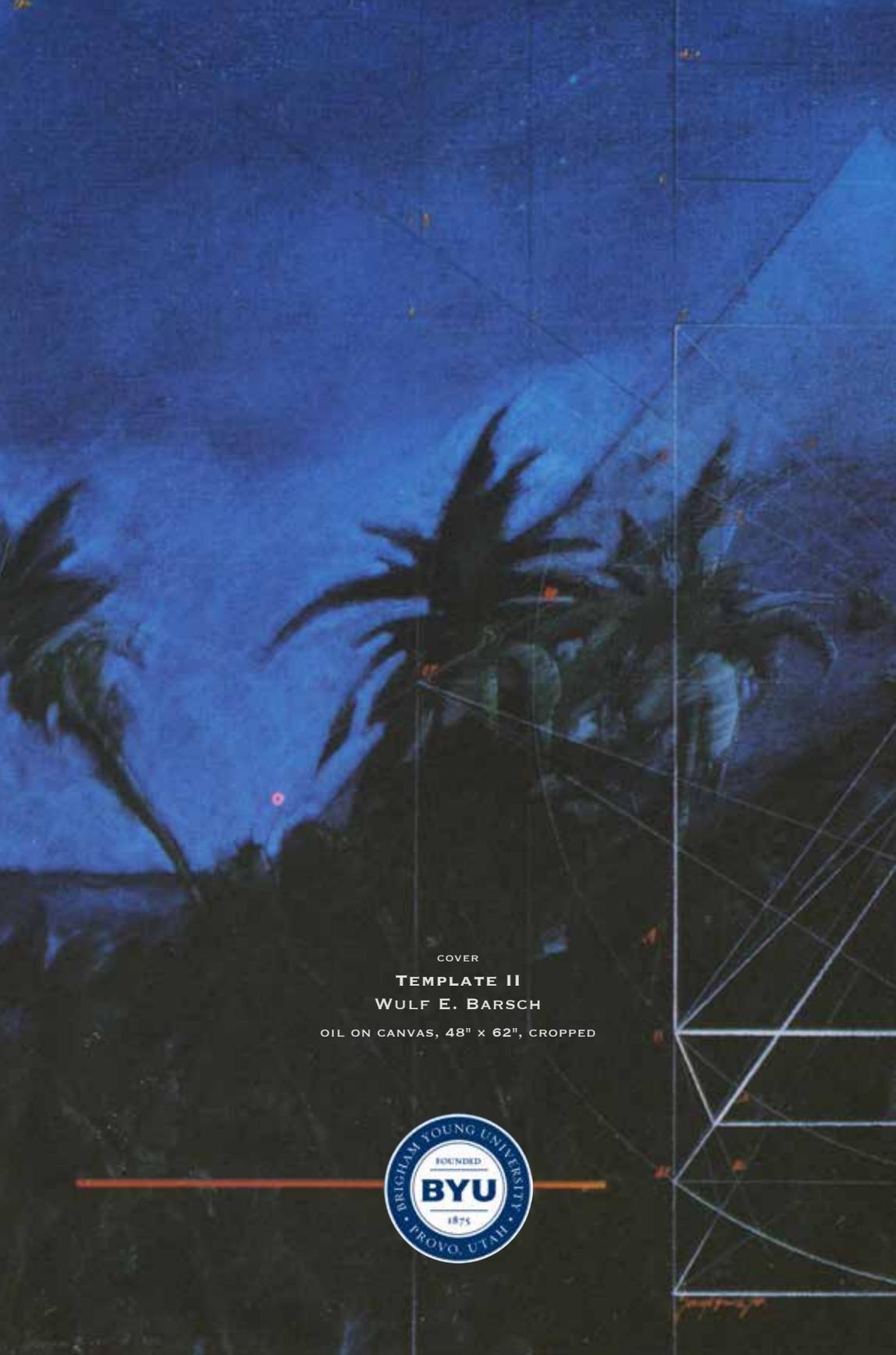
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