



**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.<sup>1</sup> 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.<sup>2</sup>

The identity of this figure is not always easy to establish, since the ancient Egyptians represented various deities and composite-deities

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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 Twenty Years Later," 10–11, unpublished manuscript, [1997], accessed December 20, 2022, 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,<sup>3</sup> and because not all hypocephali consistently feature this figure.<sup>4</sup> 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*).<sup>5</sup> 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.”<sup>6</sup> 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.”<sup>7</sup>

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.<sup>8</sup> She is sometimes

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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).<sup>9</sup>

That the goddess Hathor had an unmistakable solar component among her various divine identities and functions is recognized widely among Egyptologists.<sup>10</sup> “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.”<sup>11</sup>

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.”<sup>12</sup> 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*).<sup>13</sup> 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.<sup>14</sup>

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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.<sup>15</sup>

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.”<sup>16</sup> 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.

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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.