



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*

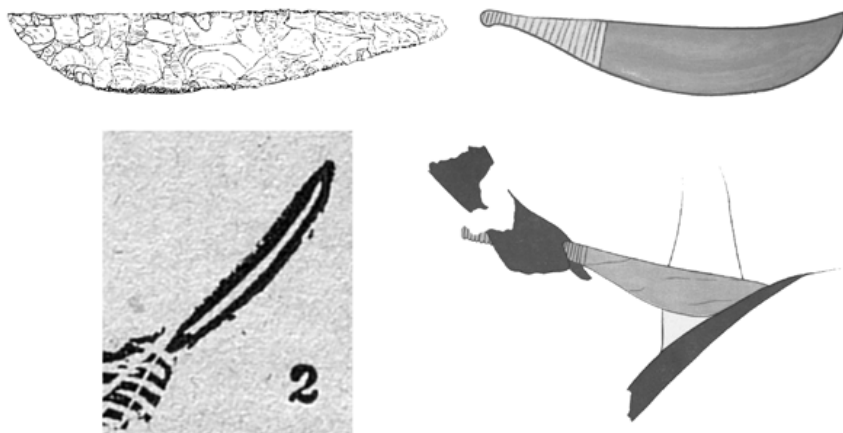


FIGURE 31. The knife in Facsimile 1 (*bottom left*) is consistent in shape with recovered flint knives (*top left*) and depictions of flint knives (*top right, bottom right*) from the Middle Kingdom. Images starting at top left and running clockwise: Petrie (1891), plate VII; Griffith (1896), plate VIII; 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.