

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 Hóri,” 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

Further Reading

- Barney, Quinten. “The Neglected Facsimile: An Examination and Comparative Study of Facsimile No. 3 of *The Book of Abraham*,” 29–62. Master’s thesis, Brigham Young University, 2019.
- Nibley, Hugh. “All the Court’s a Stage: Facsimile 3, a Royal Mummying.” Chap. 9 in *Abraham in Egypt*. 2nd ed. Edited by 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.

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.