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## The Book of Abraham: An Ongoing Research Focus

In 1998 FARMS's longtime interest in advancing research supportive of the Book of Abraham as an ancient text found new emphasis and direction as a formalized FARMS project, an impetus made possible by a farsighted donor: the Robert Gay family. Soon a working group of scholars was convened to exchange research and ideas on the text. The resulting exchange of information led to FARMS-sponsored public lectures and a scholarly conference in 1999. The next year saw publication of John Gee's *Guide to the Joseph Smith Papyri* and, fortuitously, an enlarged edition of Hugh Nibley's *Abraham in Egypt* (a project years in the making). Following in short order were the first two volumes in the Studies in the Book of Abraham series—*Traditions about the Early Life of Abraham* (2001) and *The Hor Book of Breathings* (2002)—and a “World of Abraham” symposium and scholarly conference in 2002.

“We are interested in illuminating the background of the Book of Abraham and promoting the study of its text,” says Egyptologist John Gee, a research professor with the Institute who is a principal investigator with Brian Hauglid on the Book of Abraham project. Hauglid, a specialist in Middle East studies with BYU's Department of Ancient Scripture, adds that their aim is to “open new avenues of study for the Book of Abraham, an extremely unique, interesting text that has remained reasonably untouched in LDS scholarship.”

Gee and Hauglid point out that while the text of the Book of Abraham is straightforward and relatively unproblematic, many side issues demand that the project take on a larger scope. For example, many Latter-day Saints are not clear on how Joseph Smith acquired the papyri and what became of them. The unusual nature of the book and its facsimiles is another issue, especially for skeptics who claim that it does not resemble ancient Egyptian texts in certain details. Responding to such questions can be distracting, but it can also lead to helpful perspectives or even new findings. The work of contributing scholar Kevin Barney is one example. After examining

the assumptions behind criticisms of the facsimiles, Barney shows how there were ancient Jewish interpretations of Egyptian iconography and discusses the relevance they might have for the Book of Abraham. Barney's work appears in the forthcoming FARMS volume *Astronomy, Papyrus, and Covenant*.

To keep the project on a productive track requires a well-coordinated research effort and a constant weighing of competing priorities. Indeed, as Hauglid observes, “It seems that there is no end to the directions that research about the Book of Abraham can take. The book is filled with possibilities.”

While the project has gotten off to a solid start, much work lies ahead and is expected to take years to come to full fruition. The task alone of preparing conference proceedings for publication is hindered by limited staff and resources. *Astronomy, Papyrus, and Covenant*, a volume containing the proceedings of FARMS's 1999 conference of the same name, is slated for publication early next year (as the third volume in the Studies in the Book of Abraham series). Waiting in the wings are the proceedings of two more FARMS conferences: “The World of Abraham” (2002) and “Latter-day Saint Perspectives on the Binding of Isaac” (2004).


Seeking to illuminate the background of the Book of Abraham entails pursuing numerous lines of research from historical, geographical, cultural, scientific, and doctrinal perspectives. For example, two researchers who spoke at the “Astronomy, Papyrus, and Covenant” conference took a scientific tack as they considered the question of whether Abraham's writings imply a heliocentric or geocentric view of astronomy; and other scholars from “The World of Abraham” conference proposed theories about the location of Ur of the Chaldees in an effort to pin down the geographical dimension of the text. Such multidisciplinary breadth is an ambitious aspect of this project, one requiring the collaboration of contributing scholars.

Despite inevitable uncertainty on some issues, research to this point affirms that “the Book of Abraham is what it says it is—an ancient text,” notes Hauglid, who adds, “The antiquity of the text became quite clear as nonbiblical themes in the Book of Abraham account such as the idolatry of Terah

and the near death of Abraham were abundant in extrabiblical traditions from Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.”

Gee is working to complete a book on the historical backgrounds of the Book of Abraham. It will cover (1) how the papyri were obtained and what became of them, (2) when the text was originally written, and (3) what is known about Abraham’s world. He is also working with many of the problems presented by the Joseph Smith Papyri within the field of Egyptology. Because many scholars either do not take the papyri seriously or misinterpret their content, Gee’s goal is to “do the basic homework first and get the basic Egyptology right.” Part of that effort focuses on *hypocephali*, circular Egyptian funerary illustrations that were often placed under the head of the deceased. Facsimile 2 in the Book of Abraham is an example of a hypocephalus. Gee published an article in 2001 in a book titled *Le lotus qui sort de terre* (see accompanying sidebar) and presented on hypo-

cephali at two prestigious academic conferences this year (the Ninth International Congress of Egyptologists, held 6–12 September in Grenoble, France; and the Aegyptus Pannonia Symposium III, held 17–19 November in Budapest, Hungary).

Current plans for the project include, among other works, two volumes by Hugh Nibley (a revised edition of his *Message of the Joseph Smith Papyri* and a major new work on the Book of Abraham titled *One Eternal Round*) and a volume by Michael D. Rhodes that includes portions of the Tshemmin Book of the Dead. All books in the Studies in the Book of Abraham series will be distributed by the University of Chicago Press. Gee and Hauglid agree there is also much work to be done with the facsimiles. Whatever specific directions the project may take in the years ahead, the underlying goals remain well defined: generating solid scholarship that increases understanding and appreciation of the Book of Abraham in both the Latter-day Saint and academic communities. 

### Research on Hypocephali

One of the common questions that people have about the facsimiles in the Book of Abraham is “How do Joseph Smith’s interpretations match with those of the ancient Egyptians?” As a preliminary step to answering this very question, Michael Lyon has been gathering examples of hypocephali for years and has shared his information with John Gee and others. Gee analyzed the data to try to determine what the Egyptian identification of the figures was. In 2001, he published an article in *Le lotus qui sort de terre*, a collection of Egyptological essays in honor of Edith Varga, one of the leading experts on hypocephali.

The article, “Towards an Interpretation of Hypocephali,” includes a preliminary typology of hypocephali (Facsimile 2 is a type III hypocephalus), a concordance of various numbering systems for hypocephali, a methodology for studying hypocephali, and, as a preliminary step in that direction, a list of ancient Egyptian identifications for various figures found in hypocephali. The list, gathered from multiple hypocephali, shows that most modern Egyptological identifications of figures in hypocephali do not match those of the ancient Egyptians. This means that while the Egyptologists’ interpretations of the facsimiles do not match Joseph Smith’s, they do not match the ancient Egyptians’ either. As Gee writes, “If we ignore the ancient Egyptian identifications of the various figures in the hypocephali, we will construct an understanding of hypocephali that bears no resemblance to the ancient Egyptian understanding. We will, in short, not understand [hypocephali] at all.”

At recent academic conferences, Gee showed that some of the Egyptian phrases associated with hypocephali have been mistranslated. His expanded typology includes three new types of hypocephali, none of which are round.

An answer to the question “How do Joseph Smith’s interpretations match with those of the ancient Egyptians?” is currently premature and may never be conclusive, but we may finally be taking steps in the right direction.