Many easily recognizable Hebrew words and names can be found in the Book of Abraham. One name that hasn’t had a concrete meaning attached to it, however, is Elkenah. In this article, Barney addresses whether Elkenah is a person, place, or name; what its possible linguistic structures are; and what it might mean. Most importantly, Barney links Elkenah with the Canaanite god El and the attending cult—a cult that practiced human sacrifice. This has significant ramifications for the Book of Abraham, which has been criticized for its inclusion of human sacrifice. Assuming a northern location for the city Ur and taking Elkenah as the Canaanite El resolve the issue of child sacrifice in the Book of Abraham.
Much like the Book of Mormon, the Book of Abraham is extant only in its English translation (and in other translations based on the English text). In such a situation, the transliterated words in the text’s onomasticon take on added significance as representing possible fossilized remnants of the original text. Although the Book of Abraham contains a number of easily recognizable Hebrew words and names, many of the names in the book are obscure and have a less obvious derivation. The first of these words to appear in the text is Elkenah. In this article, I will explore the possible derivations of this word and then articulate some of the ramifications the most likely derivations would have for understanding the Book of Abraham generally.

Elkenah in the Book of Abraham

The name Elkenah appears twelve times in the Book of Abraham. The first three occurrences appear in the explanations of the figures in Facsimile 1. Figure 3 therein is identified as “the idolatrous priest of Elkenah attempting to offer up Abraham as a sacrifice,” referring to the person standing at the left of the altar. Figure 4 shows “the altar of sacrifice by the
idolatrous priests, standing before the gods of Elkenah, Libnah, Mahmackrah, Korash and Pharaoh,” referring to the lion couch, the four canopic jars, and the crocodile of the facsimile. Figure 5 is labeled “the idolatrous god of Elkenah,” referring to the falcon-headed jar, generally understood in its Egyptian context as Qebehsenuf, one of the four sons of Horus.

Turning to the text itself, we note that Elkenah is mentioned an additional seven times in Abraham 1, at verses 6, 7(bis), 13, 17, 20, and 29, and again in Abraham 2:13 and 3:20. The first three of these occurrences appear in the following quotation from Abraham 1:5–7:

My fathers, having turned from their righteousness, and from the holy commandments which the Lord their God had given unto them, unto the worshipping of the gods of the heathen, utterly refused to hearken to my voice; for their hearts were set to do evil, and were wholly turned to the god of Elkenah, and the god of Libnah, and the god of Mahmackrah, and the god of Korash, and the god of Pharaoh, king of Egypt; therefore they turned their hearts to the sacrifice of the heathen in offering up their children unto these dumb idols, and hearkened not unto my voice, but
endeavored to take away my life by the hand of the priest of Elkenah. The priest of Elkenah was also the priest of Pharaoh.

This text mentions both “the god of Elkenah” and “the priest of Elkenah,” who also does double duty as “the priest of Pharaoh.” The principal evils involved in the worship of this and the other “heathen” gods are idolatry and child sacrifice. Abraham speaks against the practice of child sacrifice but is rebuffed. Verse 10 of Abraham 1 tells of the “thank-offering of a child,” and verse 11 tells us of three virgin girls who were sacrificed by the priest of Elkenah. According to verse 12, the priests also attempted to sacrifice Abraham, apparently in part as a response to his speaking out against the practice, his father having been an instigator of the attempted sacrifice (v. 30). Abraham lifted up his voice unto the Lord, who filled him with the vision of the Almighty and sent the angel of his presence to unloose Abraham’s bands (v. 15). In verse 16 the angel speaks as if he were the Lord (or possibly this was the Lord himself), announcing to Abraham that he has heard him and has come down to deliver him into a strange land. The angel/Lord announces that the fathers have turned their hearts away from him to worship the god of Elkenah and the other idolatrous gods, and that for this reason he has come to destroy the priest who sought to take Abraham’s life (v. 17). Verse 20 tells us that this took place in the land of Ur, of Chaldea. And so the Lord breaks down the altar of Elkenah, and of the gods of the land, and utterly destroys them and smites the priest so that he dies. Finally, verse 29 reports that following the death of the priest of Elkenah, there was a famine in the land, in response to which Abraham follows God’s direction and starts for the land of Canaan (Abraham 2:4).

Was Elkenah the name of a god, a place, or a person? Each appearance of the name Elkenah in the text is preceded by “the god of,” “the gods of” (usually part of a sequence), “the priest of,” or “the altar of.” There is an inherent ambiguity in the English genitive particle of, and Hugh Nibley has suggested that, instead of the name of a god, Elkenah could be the name of a person or place. While I would acknowledge this as a possibility, in my view, the most natural way to read the text is to take “the god of Elkenah” as an epexegetical genitive (i.e., Elkenah is the god), in which case “the priest of Elkenah” would be the priest dedicated to the god of that particular cult. While either “the god [worshipped by the person] Elkenah” or “the god [worshipped at the place] Elkenah” is conceivably possible, and while I do believe that this is the correct way to read the text in the case of “the god of Pharaoh,” these alternatives in the case of “the god of Elkenah” strike me as unduly strained. In particular, I believe the language of verse 20, “and the Lord broke down the altar of Elkenah, and of the gods of the land,” equates Elkenah with the other gods of the land (in this instance not separately named as was the case previously). Indeed, since Elkenah is specifically named here and the other gods are not, and since Elkenah is always listed first (even to the point of requiring right-to-left numbering of the four gods before the altar in Facsimile 1), Elkenah would appear to be not only a god, but the preeminent god in the cultus described in the story.

At this point, let us stop and summarize the main points we can derive from the text concerning Elkenah:

• Although the name conceivably could refer to a person or place, it most likely refers to a god.
• Elkenah represents the chief god in the cult of the fathers against which Abraham argued.
• Child sacrifice was offered to this god, which was evil in the sight of the Lord. Apart from idolatrous representation, this seems to have been the principal fault of this deity from Abraham’s perspective.
• A priest of this god attempted to sacrifice Abraham in Ur of the Chaldees.
• The priest of Elkenah was also the priest of Pharaoh.
• Elkenah was represented on Facsimile 1 by the falcon-headed canopic jar of Qebehsenuf, one of the sons of Horus.
• The Lord broke the bands that bound Abraham, broke down the altar of Elkenah, destroyed the gods, and killed the priest of Elkenah.
• Following the death of the priest of Elkenah, there was a famine in the land that necessitated Abraham’s removal to the land of Canaan.

The name is spelled different ways in the extant Book of Abraham manuscripts. The distribution of these variant spellings is set forth in the accompanying table:
Frederick G. Williams seems to have started spelling the name with an -er ending, but then correcting to an -ah ending for most of his occurrences. Warren Parrish and W. W. Phelps, perhaps following the beginning of the Williams document, retained the -er ending. Willard Richards gives the form of the name as it was published in the *Times and Seasons*, and given that Joseph would have approved that text prior to publication, this is presumably the form of the name as Joseph intended it to be presented in the Book of Abraham.

**The Name Elkenah**

With that background, we can begin to approach the name itself. We are fortunate to have a partial Rosetta Stone to aid us in our investigation. The El- element of Elkenah almost certainly represents the Semitic word for deity, ʾel (or *ilu* in Akkadian). Further, in the Bible as elsewhere, Semitic El is very commonly modified in some fashion, which appears to be the case here as well. Based on known uses of the word *El*, I will suggest six (not necessarily exhaustive) possibilities for how we might take the -kenah element. As a general matter, El could be either the proper name of the god or the generic Semitic term for god. In either case, the following -kenah element could be in apposition with the El- element or in a genitival relationship, or acting as an attributive adjective or participle, a verb construed with El, or a pronominal suffix of some sort.

It would appear that the six most likely possible linguistic structures for this name are as follows:

A. El could be used as the generic appellative god with a divine name following in apposition—that is, “the god Kenah.” This usage is, however, relatively rare (one parallel being ʾil Haddu “the god Haddu”).

B. Elkenah could be a theophoric name predicking some quality of the El- compound—that is, “El is kenah” or “El kenah [as a verb],” whatever *kenah* might mean. For instance, Abraham’s chief servant was named Eliezer, “God of help” or “my God is help” (Genesis 15:2). This type of structure would only work if Elkenah were the name of a human being (or an angel) and not the name of the god himself.

C. The -kenah element could refer to a place or people. In this event, the name would mean “El of Kenah,” where Kenah is a land, country, or ethnic designation. An analogous form in the Old Testament would be ʾEl Yisrael “the God of Israel” from Psalm 68.

D. The -kenah element could refer to a person. In this event, the name would mean “El of Kenah,” where Kenah is a human being. An analogous form in the Old Testament would be ʾelohim Abraham “the God of Abraham,” as in Genesis 31:53.

E. The -kenah element could be an epithet modifying the El- element. Such epithets are common in the Old Testament. Examples of El epithets include the following:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Verse Location in Printed Book of Abraham</th>
<th>Ab2 (Williams)</th>
<th>Ab3 (Parrish)</th>
<th>Ab4 (Phelps/Parrish)</th>
<th>Ab5 (Richards)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1:6 Elk=kener</td>
<td>Elkkener</td>
<td>Elkkener</td>
<td>Elkenah</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1:7 Elk=kener</td>
<td>Elkkener</td>
<td>Elkkener</td>
<td>Elkenah</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1:7 Elk=Keenah</td>
<td>Elkkener</td>
<td>Elkkener</td>
<td>Elkenah</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1:13 Elk-keen__</td>
<td>Elkkener</td>
<td>Elkkener</td>
<td>Elkenah</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1:17 Elk-kee-nah</td>
<td>Elkkener</td>
<td>Elkkener</td>
<td>Elkenah</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1:20 Elk-keenah</td>
<td>Elkkener</td>
<td>Elkkener</td>
<td>Elkenah</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1:29 Elk+keenah</td>
<td>Elkkener</td>
<td>Elkkener</td>
<td>Elkenah</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>2:13</td>
<td></td>
<td>Elkenah</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3:20</td>
<td></td>
<td>Elkenah</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>El Combination</td>
<td>Meaning</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td>----------------</td>
<td>--------------------------------------</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>El Shaddai</td>
<td>El Almighty</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>El Elyon</td>
<td>El the Highest One</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>El Olam</td>
<td>El the Everlasting One</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>El Bethel</td>
<td>El of Bethel (i.e., the El revealed at the shrine Bethel)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>El Roi</td>
<td>El of Vision (or Divining)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>El Berith</td>
<td>El of the Covenant</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

F. Kenah could be the name of a deceased king. There is evidence of a Canaanite belief in post-mortem divinization. The Ugaritic king list precedes each name with the word ʾăl, “god.”

With this brief survey of some of the possibilities inherent in an El combination, let us now turn our attention to six concrete proposals for how the name Elkenah should be understood in the Book of Abraham (see appendix 1 for a summary):

1. ʾEl qanah “God has created.” This name occurs a number of times in the Old Testament as a personal name, mostly with reference to Korahite Levites (see appendix 2), transliterated in the King James Version as Elkanah. The name also occurs in Akkadian, both as Ilu-qana and (with the elements reversed) as Qana-ilu. The precise meaning of the name is disputed because there is a significant scholarly debate over whether the Hebrew verb qānah principally means “to create” or “to acquire.” In any event, as a theophoric name (pattern B), this name would work only if one were willing to take Elkenah in the Book of Abraham as the name of a person, as in “the god [worshipped by the person] Elkenah.” Pace Nibley, I do not believe that this is a correct reading of the Book of Abraham; I therefore would discount this name as a possible solution. It would also be difficult to account for the /a/ to /e/ vowel shift in the second syllable suggested by Book of Abraham “Elkenah.”

2. ʾEl qeni “El is mighty.” This was the first of three suggestions offered by Hugh Nibley in his Improvement Era series and involves a combination of the Semitic El with an Egyptian element qen- or qeni, which means “mighty, powerful, brave.” The form would be analogous to Amon-qen(i), “Amon is mighty.” Although Nibley devotes two columns of text to explaining this suggestion, which appears to have been his favorite, I would discount it for the same reason I would discount ʾEl qanah above; I do not believe Elkenah in the Book of Abraham is meant to refer to a human being.

3. ʾIl Kinaḥṭi “El of Canaan.” This was the second of Nibley’s three suggestions, and one that I came to myself independently. Although Nibley devoted only a few sentences to it, I believe it is actually by far the strongest of his proposals.

On the surface, however, this might appear to be one of the weaker proposals, since in Hebrew Canaan is spelled with a second n: Knʾn, or Kenʾan with Masoretic vocalization (accented on the second syllable). Egyptian also prefers the second n with the spellings Kynʾn, Kznʾn, and Knʾn. The name is also found syllabically written in Akkadian as Ki-na-ʾăl-ʾu-num (gentilic), with the pharyngeal consonant represented by ū, and as Ki-in-ʾa-nu with the pharyngeal unrepresented. In cuneiform texts from Tell El Amarna and Bogazkoy, however, the following spellings are attested: Ki-na-ʾăl-ʾi, Ki-na-ʾăl-ʾa, Ki-na-ʾăl-ʾi, Ki-na-a-ʾăl-ʾi and Ki-na-ʾi (see image on p. 27). Ugaritic also reflects both spellings with the final -n and spellings without it, as in mārʾi M MATkī-na-ʾi, “men of the land of Canaan.” The appearance of the (normalized) reduced base Kinaḥṭi indicates that the final -n in the other examples is an affixational morpheme (i.e., a grammatical element). The geminate (doubled) final consonant in Kinaḥṭu (ḥḥ-) is a common feature of the Akkadian transcription of non-Akkadian words and geographic names, as in Amurrū, Simurrū, Mitanni (nominative Mitannu), and Hilakkū. Of the dozen occurrences of “Canaan” in the Tell El Amarna letters, those originating in Canaan itself (i.e., Tyre and Byblos) use the -n affix, but those originating in Syria and Mesopotamia do not.

In the Greek of the Septuagint as well as in the New Testament, Canaan is transliterated XaavaChana, based on the Hebrew spelling. There are other Greek sources, however, that spell the name Chna [Xva chi-nu-alpha]. For instance, Hecataeus of Miletus affirmed that Phoenicia was called Chna. Philo of Byblos in his Phoenician History identifies a certain Chna as the first to carry the name “Phoenician,” and Herodianus Grammaticus (second century AD) and Stephanus of Byzantium (s.v. Chnā) report that the Phoenicians were formerly called.
These Greek sources appear to represent a continuity with the Akkadian reduced form Kinaḫḫu.

The etymology of Canaan has been somewhat elusive. Scholars have moved from Semitic, to non-Semitic, and back to Semitic assumptions concerning the origin of the name. Ephraim A. Speiser argued that Kinaḫḫu had a Hurrian origin, consisting of kina and the Hurrian suffix -(ḫ)ḫi “belonging to.” The meaning of the kina element was somewhat uncertain. One possibility was that it meant “reed,” with the word itself meaning “land of reeds” (compare Byblos, so named for being an exporter of papyrus, which was made from reeds, whence the Greek word for “book” [bublos] and English “bible”). A second possibility was that kina meant red purple dye (derived from a certain type of shell common on the seacoast), which seemed to be supported by cuneiform texts from Nuzi. On this theory the occasional -n affix would be the Hurrian definite article or a determinative suffix, and Kinaḫḫu would mean “Belonging to (the land of) Purple.” This etymology was appealing because it suggested a continuity with the Greek word for the Phoenicians, Phoinike (from phoinix, “red purple”), and it also explained the use of Hebrew knʿny for “merchant.” But it has since been shown that the Hurrian word had a different history than that posited by Speiser, and improved attestation of third-millennium-bc geographic names from Syria-Palestine has lessened the likelihood of a Hurrian etymology for Canaan. For instance, the ethnicon Canaanite is now attested in a text from Mari as “ki-na-al-h-num” It now appears that the words for “purple” and “merchant”
took their names from the region, rather than giving their names to the region. The meaning of the word now most likely must be sought in the Semitic lexicon, in which event the -n affix is not a Hurrian grammatical element at all, but an attested, though rare, Semitic noun-forming suffix.31

If, as most scholars now believe, the word is Semitic in origin, it almost certainly derives from the root *KNʿ (“to bend the knee, to bow”), with an affirmative -n sometimes added. One possible Semitic etymology for the word, suggested long ago by Wilhelm Gesenius, is “lowland” (as opposed to the higher country of Aram to the east),32 but this is problematic because the root does not have the intransitive meaning “to be low.” The most recent and widely accepted Semitic etymology for Canaan was put forward by Michael Astour.33 He noted that *KNʿ in Biblical Hebrew [kanaʿ] is found only in the niphal verb stem (“to be subdued,” “to lower oneself”) and in the hiphil (“to subdue”). In Aramaic, the verb [kenaʿ] also occurs in the qal, “to bow down, bend.” Arabic kanaʿa has several usages, including (1) “to fold wings and descend to earth” (said of a large bird) and (2) “to bow, to incline toward the horizon” (said of a star). As applied to the sun, the word would be exactly equivalent to Latin occidere.34 Therefore, Astour takes the derived form Kinaʿu as signifying the “Occident,” the “Land of Sunset,” or “Westland.”35 This is the West Semitic equivalent of Akkadian Amurrū “West.” In Amarna-era texts and in the Bible, the terms Canaan and Amurrū are largely synonymous.36 It is interesting in this connection that the sons of Horus stood for the four cardinal directions37 and that Qebehsenuf, which represents “the idolatrous god of Elkenah”), as Duamutef,42 who represented the East. Since the Kenites lay to the east of Heliopolis, this seemed to him like a natural fit. The hawk-headed figure is usually not, however, Duamutef, but Qebehsenuf, and this is the god representing the West, not the East, as described above. Therefore, a significant portion of the rationale for this proposal was based on a mistake.

4. ‘El Qini “El of the Kenites.” This was the third of Nibley’s three suggestions. The Kenites are first mentioned at Genesis 15:19 (as part of a list of peoples God would dispossess to give their land to Abraham’s descendants) and were understood to be descendants of Cain [Qayin], although in fact their name probably refers to their metalworking craft. These were desert nomads who lived to the east of Egypt and were generally viewed favorably by the Israelites. Moses’s father-in-law, Jethro, was a Kenite. Part of the rationale for this proposal, apart from a mild linguistic resemblance, is based on something of a misunderstanding. Apparently following Klaus Baer,41 Nibley took the hawk-headed jar of Facsimile 1, figure 5 (i.e., “the idolatrous god of Elkenah”), as Duamutef,42 who represented the East. Since the Kenites lay to the east of Heliopolis, this seemed to him like a natural fit. The hawk-headed figure is usually not, however, Duamutef, but Qebehsenuf, and this is the god representing the West, not the East, as described above. Therefore, a significant portion of the rationale for this proposal was based on a mistake.

5. 4Il-gi-na (meaning uncertain). John Lundquist has suggested this as a possibility.43 It is number 407 on a list of 3,800 Mesopotamian deities. Lundquist suggests that the gi syllable can also be read as ki,44 and the name is accompanied by the Sumerian DINGIR determinative, indicating that this is the name of a god. This is certainly a possibility; since, however, we know nothing else about this deity, it is rather difficult to evaluate how strong a possibility it might be (apart from linguistic similarity).

6. ‘El qoneh “El the Creator.” This would be a hypocoristic form of the well-attested Canaanite epithet ‘l qn arṣ, “El, Creator of the Earth,” which is itself a shorter version of the later and longer form of the epithet found at Genesis 14:19, 22: ‘el ʾelyon qoneh shamayim weʿares “El Most High, Creator of the Heaven and the Earth.”45 In a Hittite myth borrowed from Canaan prior to 1200 bc, El is called “Elkunirša” (the Hittite spelling of West Semitic ‘l qn ʿarṣ). This El was the husband of the goddess Asherah (= Ashertu) and lived in a tent at the headwaters of the Euphrates (= Mala River.46 This name appears in the Phoenician-Hittite bilingual inscription of Azitawadda.47 This same epithet (‘l qn ʿarṣ, partially restored) was found in a three-line inscription dating to the eighth or seventh century bc by...
Nahman Avigad in the Jewish quarter of Jerusalem in 1971.48 There is a substantial body of literature on this name.49

The similarity in form of this name to proposal 1 is due to the fact that the same verb is used in both names, but here the verb is an attributive participle. While the consonants work well, the vowels are a weakness of this theory. The participial form in Phoenician and Ugaritic would be qaniy(u) (where the final –u is the case ending). Due to the Canaanite and other sound shifts, that participial form comes into Hebrew as qoneh. In neither case do the vowels mesh well with kenah, with its short initial vowel followed by an /a/ quality second vowel. Of course, the Book of Abraham was translated by an inspired rather than an academic translation process, and it is possible that the representation of the name in English is but an approximation of the original, ancient form.

In assessing these six proposals, for the reasons I have indicated, I would consider numbers 1, 2, and 4 as the least likely possibilities. Number 5 is possible, but in the absence of further information it cannot be effectively assessed. In my view, the strongest proposals are numbers 3 and 6. Based on present information, however, it may be difficult to select between these options. This is because number 3 is based on the Semitic root *KN, and number 6 on *QNH, and the English element -kenah in the Book of Abraham is not sufficiently precise to distinguish between these two roots.50 Number 6 gets points for being based on a strongly attested El epithet. Also, some Book of Abraham manuscripts spell Elkenah as “Elkkener,” with an “r” ending, which is at least suggestive of the plene form of the epithet. On the other hand, while Kinahlji is not to my knowledge attested with an El combination, the patterns “El of [place-name]” and “[god] of Canaan” are both attested. Kinahlji itself is attested earlier than number 6, and this proposal does not require that we posit a hypocoristic form. Also, in my view, the vowels work better for proposal 3 than for any other (including proposal 1). All things considered, it seems to me that we have a draw between proposals 3 and 6, at least pending further research. For many purposes, however, our inability to decide conclusively between these two proposals will not matter, because both have reference to the same deity: Canaanite El.

Elkenah as Canaanite El

Does an equation of Canaanite El with Elkenah fit what we know of Elkenah from the Book of Abraham text? I believe that it does. First of all, we suggested that Elkenah must be a reference to a god and not a man. We know that Elkenah could be a human’s name from biblical attestations, but we have now also demonstrated that Elkenah works very well as the name of a god.

Second, we deduced that this god was likely the chief god of its pantheon. El in fact was the supreme deity of the Canaanite pantheon. El was the father and creator of gods and men. He was perceived as an aged patriarch, wise in judgment, the king of heaven, and chief of the council of the gods. He was a tent dweller and lived in the far north. His patriarchal authority was won in the ancient wars of the gods as a great warrior. His principal wife was Asherah, mother and creatress of the gods, although his other sisters Anat and Astarte also served as consorts. His vigorous procreative powers populated heaven and earth.51

Third, we saw that Abraham’s experience with this god took place at Ur of the Chaldees. If we can assume the northern location for Ur in Syria,52 the presence of a Canaanite cult (together with some Egyptian syncretism, seen in the priest of Elkenah also acting as the priest of Pharaoh) in that area is not surprising. El was not only the supreme deity in Canaan, but in Syria-Palestine generally.53 Lundquist reports that the chief deities at Ebla were Dagan, Baal, Sipish (or Shemesh), Kemash, Ashtar (the male version of Ishtar), and Hadda.54 Syncretistic Canaanite versions of these deities also existed (with Dagan being the Syrian equivalent of El).

If proposal 3 is correct, this may explain why it was necessary to qualify the name El with “of Canaan” or “of the West,” in order clearly to distinguish this from another El cult. If proposal 6 is correct, note that the myths relating to this deity place him at the headwaters of the Euphrates, which is in the general area of the northern location for Ur.

Fourth, and perhaps most importantly, an identification of Elkenah as Canaanite El would help to explain the presence of child sacrifice in the Book of Abraham account. In 1969, William J. Adams Jr. published an article in BYU Studies entitled “Human Sacrifice and the Book of Abraham.”55 At the time Adams was a graduate student...
in Akkadian, Ugaritic, and Old Testament languages at Hebrew Union College. Adams showed Facsimile 1 to some of his fellow students in Assyriology, who immediately claimed that there was no evidence the Babylonians ever practiced human sacrifice. This led Adams to look into the matter; his interest in the topic was further spurred with the recovery of the original of Facsimile 1 from the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York.

Adams found that, while there was a widespread scholarly assumption against Babylonian human sacrifice, certain scholars remained uncommitted either way. Looking into the evidence himself, he did find some suggestive items from four sources: (1) circumstantial evidence from archaeological digs, (2) comments in ancient written texts, (3) human sacrifices as pictured on cylinder seals, and (4) the behavior of other Semitic peoples regarding the practice of human sacrifice. Adams assumed that Ur of the Chaldees was in southern Mesopotamia and therefore assumed that evidence for human sacrifice in the Book of Abraham should come from Babylonian sources. Most of the evidence Adams found was either subject to alternative explanations or apparently based on influence from western Semitic religions.

If we assume a northern location for Ur and take Elkenah as Canaanite El, then human sacrifice in the Book of Abraham is no longer a difficulty. While Babylonian (and Egyptian) evidence of human sacrifice of the type portrayed in Abraham 1 may be somewhat limited, scholars generally agree that human sacrifice was a long-accepted practice in Canaanite religion. The Old Testament preserves a number of allusions to Canaanite practices of human and child sacrifice, such as Deuteronomy 12:31; Psalm 106:37–39; Isaiah 66:3; Micah 6:7, and the numerous references to the Molech cult (including Leviticus 18:21; 20:2; 2 Kings 3:27; 16:3; 17:17, 31; and 23:10; Jeremiah 7:31–32; 32:35; and Ezekiel 16:20–21). The Akedah (“binding” of Isaac) in Genesis 22 likely had a Canaanite background. It was El among the gods who sacrificed his own children, Yadid and Mot. Classical sources and archaeological discoveries attest to human sacrifice in the continuum from Canaanite to Phoenician to Punic religion, with the popularity of child sacrifice at Carthage being dependent on an El cult. If Elkenah was Canaanite El, then the feature of child sacrifice in the Book of Abraham fits that cult very well indeed.

Although the Molech cult spoken of in the Bible, which is a particular manifestation of the long-standing Canaanite penchant for child sacrifice, postdates the time of Abraham, it does have some indirect relevance to the Book of Abraham. Some scholars, notably Moshe Weinfeld, have questioned whether the cult really involved child sacrifice, preferring to see the key expression “to pass through the fire” as a simple dedication to the god. Most scholars, however, acknowledge that the cult did indeed involve the actual killing of children. A second issue is whether Molech should be taken as the name of a god or simply as the name of an offering, as Otto Eissfeldt argued in 1935. Although there is in fact a Punic term mulk that means “offering,” most scholars believe that the Old Testament references to Molech are to an actual deity. A third issue is the identification of this deity. There have been many proposals, but the most widely held view today equates the god with the Mk resident at ’tttrt mentioned in the Ras Shamra tablets (Malik in Akkadian texts), a god of the netherworld.

It has sometimes been supposed that human sacrifice to Molech should be identified with the offering of the firstborn male to Yahweh mentioned in the Pentateuch. In distinguishing these practices, scholars have pointed out that the Canaanite sacrifices were not limited to the firstborn, nor were they limited to one child only per family, nor were they limited to sons, as the sources speak repeatedly of offering daughters as well as sons. It is interesting in this light that the Book of Abraham mentions the sacrifice of three daughters, which thus accords with known Canaanite practices.

Conclusion

We began by examining the Book of Abraham text to see what it tells us about the figure Elkenah. Based on an assumption that the El- element in the name is Semitic ʾel, we identified a number of possible linguistic structures for an ancient El combination. We then reviewed six concrete proposals for Elkenah, concluding that the strongest possibilities, “El of Canaan” and “El the Creator,” both point in the direction of the same deity: Canaanite El.
This deity compares favorably with the information set forth in the Book of Abraham text regarding Elkenah.70 In particular, the type of sacrifice described in Abraham 1 fits a cultic setting in Syro-Palestinian or Canaanite territory much more readily than it fits a Mesopotamian or Assyro-Babylonian scenario. More to the point, the scene on Facsimile 1, with its representation of a human sacrifice on an Egyptian lion couch, fits extremely well with Egyptian Middle Kingdom evidence for the cultic ritual of human sacrifice.71 Although there is much more work to be done (including similar studies of the other names in the Book of Abraham onomasticon), both the name Elkenah and the cult described in the text seem to point to a Syro-Palestinian context for Abraham 1. Consistent with Lundquist’s study, I believe that future research should focus on this region as a prime location for the possible setting of the text.

APPENDIX 1
Summary of Proposed Derivations of Elkenah

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Transliteration(s)</th>
<th>Meaning</th>
<th>Language(s)</th>
<th>Structure</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. <em>Ilu-qana</em>; ʾEl qanah</td>
<td>God has created [a son]</td>
<td>Akkadian; Hebrew</td>
<td>(B) Theophoric</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. ʾEl qeni</td>
<td>El is mighty</td>
<td>[Semitic]/Egyptian</td>
<td>(B) Theophoric</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. <em>Il Kinaḥḥi</em>; El Chna</td>
<td>El of Canaan</td>
<td>Akkadian; Greek transliteration</td>
<td>(C) God of [place/people]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. ʾEl Qini</td>
<td>El of the Kenites</td>
<td>[Semitic]</td>
<td>(C) God of [place/people]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. <em>Il-gi-na</em></td>
<td>[uncertain; possibly “God of Regular Offering”]</td>
<td>Sumerian</td>
<td>[uncertain; possibly (E) God + epithet]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. ʾl qn a[<em>r</em>s]; Elkuni[<em>r</em>s]; ʾEl qoneh</td>
<td>El the Creator [hypocoristic for El, Creator of the Earth]</td>
<td>Canaanite; Hittite; Hebrew</td>
<td>(E) God + epithet</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
APPENDIX 2

The Name Elkanah in the Old Testament

| 1. Son of Korah (and great-grandson of Levi) | Exodus 6:24 |
| 2. A Korahite Levite (possibly the same as 1) | 1 Chronicles 6:23, 25, 36 |
| 3. A Korahite Levite, descended from 2 | 1 Chronicles 6:26, 35 |
| 4. A Korahite Levite, descended from 3 and father of Samuel | 1 Chronicles 6:27, 34; 1 Samuel 1–2 (8 occurrences) |
| 5. A Korahite Levite who was one of David’s warriors at Ziklag | 1 Chronicles 12:6 |
| 6. A Levite who was one of two doorkeepers for the ark of the covenant | 1 Chronicles 15:23 |
| 7. A high official in the court of Ahaz, assassinated by Zichri, an Ephraimitic warrior | 2 Chronicles 28:7 |
| 8. A Levite who was the ancestor of Berechiah son of Asa, who settled in Jerusalem after returning from the Babylonian exile | 1 Chronicles 9:16 |

Adapted from Ronald Youngblood, “Elkanah,” in ABD, 2:475–76.

Notes

1. A draft of this article was posted on the Internet at BCC Papers 2/2 (2007) at bycommonconsent.com.

2. In Abraham 2:13, “gods of Elkenah” is not used as part of a sequence. I would read that as a further evidence that Elkenah was the chief deity of the pantheon, preeminent among the gods.

3. Note that in the usage of the Hebrew Bible, the expression “altar of” can be followed by the material of which the altar is composed (“altar of stones,” “altar of gold”), the purpose of the altar (“altar of incense”), or the deity to whom the altar is dedicated (“altar of the Lord,” “altar of Baal”). This last type of occurrence is attested at Leviticus 17:6; Deuteronomy 12:27; 16:21; 26:4; 27:6; Joshua 9:27; 22:19; 28–29; Judges 6:25; 28, 30; 1 Kings 8:22, 54; 18:30; 2 Kings 23:9; 2 Chronicles 6:12; 8:12; 15:8; 29:19; 21, 33:15–16; 35:16; Nehemiah 10:34; Malachi 2:13. The expression “altar of X” is never used to refer to a human being who owns or has constructed the altar.


5. Stephen E. Thompson, “Egyptology and the Book of Abraham,” Dialogue 28/1 (1995): 156 n. 66, correctly reads “the god of Elkenah” as “the god Elkenah,” but then assumes “the god of Pharaoh” must mean “the god Pharaoh” based on consistency of usage. Nibley made the opposite argument; he (correctly, in my view) observed that, since Pharaoh is a human king and is consistently represented as such in the text, “the god of Pharaoh” most likely means “the god worshiped by Pharaoh,” and then argued based on consistency of usage that “the god of Elkenah” means “the god worshiped by Elkenah,” as discussed above. I believe both of these scholars are wrong to assume consistency of usage. I believe Thompson is correct vis-à-vis Elkenah (Thompson points out that the reference in Abraham 1:7 to a “priest of Elkenah” and not a “priest of the god of Elkenah” supports this reading), but Nibley is correct vis-à-vis Pharaoh (there are a number of references to Pharaoh in the text, in which he is consistently portrayed as a human king and not in his divinized aspect). This reading is confirmed by Abraham 1:13: “and it stood before the gods of Elkenah, Libnah, Mah-mackrah, Korah, and also a god like unto that of Pharaoh, king of Egypt.” The genitive with the first four names is expository, meaning that they were themselves gods, but the construction is modified when it comes to describing the god worshipped by Pharaoh, a human king. Further support for this reading occurs at Abraham 1:17, which mentions “the god of Pharaoh, king of Egypt.”

7. Nibley's emphasis in his Improvement Era series (now
reprinted in An Approach to the Book of Abraham, 313–19)
was to lay out as many different possibilities as he could,
without necessarily choosing the strongest among them.
It remains for those who follow him to sift through the
many tantalizing leads he provided and make these kinds of
judgments.
8. In manuscript Ab5a, Willard Richards spells the three occur-
rences of the name in the explanations to Facsimile 1 as Elke-
nah. The manuscript designations are those used by Brian M.
Hauglid in his forthcoming textual history of the Book of
Abraham. These sigla relate to the traditional designations as
follows: Ab2 = KEPA 2; Ab3 = KEPA 3; Ab4 = KEPA 1; and
Ab5 = KEPA 4.
9. Frank Moore Cross, Canaanite Myth and Hebrew Epic: Ess-
y in the History of the Religion of Israel (Cambridge, MA: Har-
10. There is often an ambiguity in ancient Hebrew theophoric
names reflecting a medial yod, which could be either a first
person pronominal suffix or an archaic genitive. So, for
example, the name MeIchizedek could mean either “My king
is righteousness” or “King of righteousness.”
11. Numerous other El epithets exist, such as the following
examples from the Old Testament: “el de
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To summarize that the attested Akkadian forms for these two cases reflect two variations: (1) the pharyngeal consonant can be represented as an affix or not, and (2) the -n affix can be appended or not (this usage apparently being dependent on geographic location).

The forms also reflect two linguistic developments: (1) the dropping of mimation and (2) the reduction of the final double consonant to a single consonant. The form Elkenah in the Book of Abraham reflects two additional linguistic developments, which are both easily predictable and actually attested in the later Hebrew and Greek forms: (1) the shift from Akkadian i to e or schwa and (2) the dropping of the case endings. If proposal 3 is correct, then the only remaining ambiguity in Elkenah is whether the final -n represents the pharyngeal consonant or is simply to be taken with the preceding a vowel.


Lundquist overstates this possibility. The G15 sign is the KI sign and the GI sign is also the KI2 sign, but they are not interchangeable as they might appear. Sumerian gi-na = Akkadian ganu “regular offering”; see Rykke Borger, Metoponatimisches Zeichenbuchschrift (Münster: Uتر-Verlag, 2004), 280; Chicago Assyrian Dictionary G 80–82.

I am uncertain as to which LDS scholar deserves credit for first suggesting this connection. Stephen D. Ricks makes the suggestion in John Gee and Stephen D. Ricks, “Historical Plausibility: The Historicity of the Book of Abraham as a Case Study,” in History and the Latter-day Saint Scriptures, ed. Paul Y. Hoskisson (Provo, UT: BYU Religious Studies Center, 2001), 75. The suggestion was also made in W. V. Smith, A Joseph Smith Commentary on the Book of Abraham, at www.boap.org/LDS/BOAP/SecondEd/index.html, p. 22 of commentary (accessed 25 March 2010). I also found a significant amount of information on this subject in the archives of the ANE Listserv at the University of Chicago for 23 June 1998 (volume 1998, number 171); John Tvedtnes of the Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship at BYU was one of the posters in that thread and had significant information on this epithet at his fingertips, which suggests that he may also have known about this proposal at that time. The archive is available at oi.uchicago.edu/research/library/ane/digest/1998/v1998.n171 (accessed 17 March 2010). Of course, another scholar may have noted this possibility even earlier, or perhaps several scholars noted the connection independently.


For the Phoenician version, see Herbert Donner and Wolfgang Röllig, Kanaaäische und Aramäische Inschriften (Weisbaden: Harrassowitz, 1966), #26 A, III, line 18 (p. 37). Tvedtnes points out that there are Luvian correspondences for this title, on which see Emmanuel Laroche, “Études sur les hiéroglyphes hittites,” Syria 31 (1954): 102–3.

Patrick D. Miller Jr., “El, the Creator of the Earth,” Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research, no. 239 (1980): 43–46. This article also lists other Aramaic and Neo-Punic sources for this epithet.


For instance, the Sephardic transliteration method Joseph Smith learned from Joshua Seixas in the Kirtland Hebrew School does not distinguish kaph and qoph, using k for both; see Joshua Seixas, A Manual Hebrew Grammar for the Use of Beginners (Andover: Gould and Newman, 1834), 5. As we have seen, Akkadian represented the guttural at the end of a word by both kaph and qoph, not at all. See “ilu” in the Chicago Assyrian Dictionary (Chicago: Oriental Institute, 1921– ), 7.91.


Numerous LDS scholars have argued for a northern location of Ur in Syria rather than the location in southern Mesopot-
tamia. See Nibley, An Approach to the Book of Abraham, 427–28, and Abraham in Egypt, 2nd ed. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 2000), 85–86; Lundquist, “Was Abraham at Ebla?” 225–27; 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 (Provo, UT: BYU Religious Studies Center, 1989), 119–36; John A. Tvedt, “‘Ur of the Chaldees’ and the Book of Abraham” (unpublished paper); and Gee and Ricks, “Historical Plausibility.” I concur with the position of these scholars. Wilson, “A Bird in the Hand,” strikes a cautionary note and argues for the southern location in Mesopotamia. If this position is correct, more research would be required to determine to what extent there may have been Canaanite influences there. The Amorite migrations mentioned by Wilson would certainly suggest a possible source of such influence.

53. Handy, Syro-Palestinian Pantheon, 69–95.
56. Thom Wayment, “Traditions of Child Sacrifice in the Ancient Near East” (unpublished paper), also addresses evidence for both Assyro-Babylonian and Egyptian practices of human sacrifice.
57. Intriguingly, near the end of his lengthy study, Green concludes that “almost all evidence of human sacrifice in the Palestinian region can be traced back to a northern origin around north Syria and south Anatolia. This northern strand may be traced chronologically from the Abraham-Isaac narrative based on seals and subsequently through each consecutive period.” See Green, Role of Human Sacrifice, 200.
60. See Sakkunyaton’s “Phoenician Theology” preserved in fragments in Eusebius, Praeparatio Evangelica i.10.21, 34, 44, cited in Cross, “‘el,” 1:248.
62. See the discussion in Wayment, “Traditions of Child Sacrifice.”
63. The Canaanites and the Phoenicians represent approximately the same culture. Scholars generally use the word Canaanite to refer to the period antedating roughly 1200 BC, and the word Phoenician to refer to the period thereafter. Punic derives from the Latin form of Phoenician and has special reference to Carthage, a Phoenician colony founded on the north coast of Africa in the ninth century BC.
64. Cross, “‘el,” 1:248.
68. This proposal can be found in Day, God of Human Sacrifice, where he argues that the existence of a god named Molech is suggested by a god mlk from two Ugaritic serpent charms, and an obscure god Malik/Malku from Akkadian god lists who in two texts was equated with Nergal, the Mesopotamian god of the underworld. A god of the underworld is just the kind of god one might worship in the valley of Hinnom rather than on a hilltop.
69. Actually, if one were so inclined, one could make an argument that this deity is to be equated with El. It has been suggested that Molech is a dysphemism, the vowels having been tampered with by replacing them with the vowels of bosh et “shame” (a process that has been demonstrated in the case of the corruption of Ashtart to Ashtoreth; compare also the use of Ishboseth “man of shame” for Saul’s son Eshbaal “man of the lord,” as described in Hoskisson, “Proper Names,” 128–29). If that is true, the name in reality could be the generic melek “king” (especially since it is usually preceded by the definite article), in which event the reference would most likely be to El or Baal, the Canaanite deities most commonly designated as “king” in epithets (as in ‘ml mlk, “El the King”).
70. On why a Canaanite deity would be represented by Egyptian symbols on the facsimiles, see Barney, “Facsimiles and Semitic Adaptation.”
71. See the extensive bibliography in the unpublished article, “An Egyptian Context for the Sacrifice of Abraham,” by John Gee and Kerry Muhlestein on human sacrifice in the Egyptian Middle Kingdom.