



Review of Books on the Book of Mormon 1989–2011

Volume 15 | Number 1

Article 9

1-1-2003

Nibley's *Abraham in Egypt*: Laying the Foundation for Abraham Research

Brian M. Hauglid

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/msr>

BYU ScholarsArchive Citation

Hauglid, Brian M. (2003) "Nibley's *Abraham in Egypt*: Laying the Foundation for Abraham Research," *Review of Books on the Book of Mormon 1989–2011*: Vol. 15 : No. 1 , Article 9.
Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/msr/vol15/iss1/9>

This The Book of Abraham is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at BYU ScholarsArchive. It has been accepted for inclusion in Review of Books on the Book of Mormon 1989–2011 by an authorized editor of BYU ScholarsArchive. For more information, please contact scholarsarchive@byu.edu, ellen_amatangelo@byu.edu.



NEAL A. MAXWELL INSTITUTE
FOR RELIGIOUS SCHOLARSHIP

BRIGHAM YOUNG UNIVERSITY • PROVO, UTAH

Title Nibley's *Abraham in Egypt*: Laying the Foundation for Abraham Research

Author(s) Brian M. Hauglid

Reference *FARMS Review* 15/1 (2003): 87-90.

ISSN 1550-3194 (print), 2156-8049 (online)

Abstract Review of *Abraham in Egypt* (2000), by Hugh Nibley.

NIBLEY'S *ABRAHAM IN EGYPT*:
LAYING THE FOUNDATION FOR
ABRAHAM RESEARCH

Brian M. Hauglid

Hugh Nibley is likely one of the most widely read Latter-day Saint scholars and has been so for over forty years. His academic studies of the Book of Mormon were groundbreaking, and his social essays have been, for me, inspirational and, in many cases, convicting. When I read Nibley it quickly becomes apparent that he is not only a brilliant scholar but also a committed disciple of Jesus Christ. His consistent blending of faith and reason bolsters my respect for him and my confidence in what he says. Nibley's writings exemplify Peter's counsel to "be ready always to give an answer to every man that asketh you a reason of the hope that is in you with meekness and fear [i.e., reverence]" (1 Peter 3:15).

The new edition of *Abraham in Egypt* (volume 14 in the Collected Works of Hugh Nibley) published conjointly by Deseret Book and the Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies (FARMS) is a fine example of Nibley's command of languages, literature, and history. He lays the foundation for various aspects of Abraham research, such as responding to the Book of Abraham critics, examining parallels

Review of Hugh Nibley. *Abraham in Egypt*, ed. Gary P. Gillum and illustrations directed by Michael P. Lyon, 2nd ed. Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 2000. xxxiii + 705 pp., with scripture and subject indexes. \$34.95.

between the Book of Abraham and ancient texts, and analyzing connections of Book of Abraham materials with Egyptian religion and culture. Of course Latter-day Saints will be pleased because Nibley never forgets who his audience is and seeks to bring all his research under the umbrella of the gospel.

This new edition is superior in several ways to the 1981 edition published by Deseret Book. These improvements were made under the supervision of Gary Gillum and staff members at FARMS. Added to this second edition are several chapters from Nibley's series *A New Look at the Pearl of Great Price*, which originally appeared in the *Improvement Era* from 1968 to 1970. A few of these added chapters are, however, placed anachronistically in the book. For instance, chapter 4, "Setting the Stage—The World of Abraham," was written twelve years before chapter 2, "Joseph Smith and the Sources." Still, because these chapters do not generally address the same subject I think their placement makes the book well rounded and adds to its overall purpose. Some of my favorite articles from the *New Look at the Pearl of Great Price* series found in this new edition include "Setting the Stage—The World of Abraham" and "The Sacrifice of Sarah," as well as Nibley's delightful and at times humorous "Joseph Smith and the Sources" and "Joseph Smith and the Critics," both of which take to task some of the earlier critics of the Pearl of Great Price.

Endnotes in each chapter of this new edition have been source checked and updated, and if a particular source could not be found or Nibley's assertion could not be verified, such is mentioned in the endnotes (see, for example, pp. 546–53 nn. 170, 259, 371). Only a few instances occur where sources are not directly referenced in the endnotes.¹

Excellent editing of a volume of over seven hundred pages with literally hundreds of endnotes is nothing short of miraculous, and the typesetting and layout of this book look almost impeccable. I found only one misspelled name that was likely transmitted from the earlier edition. On pages 300 and 301 (see p. 110 in 1981 edition)

1. See, for example, the two quotations from the chapter "The Rivals" (pp. 226–27) that are not directly referenced in endnotes 33 and 34 (p. 250).

Eupolemus is misspelled *Eumolpus*. As far as I know no such person named Eumolpus exists.

Among the impressive features of this edition are the numerous illustrations accompanying the narrative and rituals; some are drawn by the talented Michael Lyon, and others are computer-enhanced. In addition, the volume contains maps, charts, and helpful indexes. Even though Nibley did not update the research in this volume, these changes and improvements have, I think, justified a second edition to this classic work.

However, Latter-day Saints should not look at this book as the final word on Abraham research. Much is happening among Latter-day Saint scholars that either builds on Nibley's previous foundational work or is opening new areas of research to increase our understanding of the Book of Abraham. For the past several years FARMS has sponsored the Studies in the Book of Abraham project. This project opens a venue for Latter-day Saint scholars to publish their research on various aspects of the Book of Abraham. Two volumes of the Studies in the Book of Abraham series have recently been published.² I believe the first volume, *Traditions about the Early Life of Abraham*, updates Nibley's previous research by comparing Abraham traditions from Jewish, Christian, and Islamic texts with the Book of Abraham. While Nibley provides a stimulating comparison and analysis of the *Apocalypse of Abraham* and the *Testament of Abraham* in the chapter "The Book of Abraham and the Book of the Dead," the *Traditions* book builds on Nibley's previous work by not only presenting these two traditions but also offering over one hundred others that have specific relevance to the Book of Abraham. Some of these traditions appear for the first time.³ In addition, the 1999 Book of Abraham

2. John A. Tvedtnes, Brian M. Hauglid, and John Gee, comps. and eds., *Traditions about the Early Life of Abraham* (Provo, Utah: FARMS, 2001); and Michael D. Rhodes, *The Holy Book of Breathing: A Translation and Commentary* (Provo, Utah: FARMS, 2002). An additional aid in Abraham studies is John Gee, *A Guide to the Joseph Smith Papyri* (Provo, Utah: FARMS, 2000).

3. Ishaq Ibn Bishr (d. 821), for example, was not available to Nibley and is published for the first time in both English and Arabic. Cf. Tvedtnes, Hauglid, and Gee, *Traditions*, 310–26, 515–19.

conference “Astronomy, Papyri, and Covenant” and the 2001 conference “The World of Abraham” sponsored by FARMS both updated and presented new materials on Abraham research.

Still, *Abraham in Egypt* is a provocative foray into the heart of the Book of Abraham. From Nibley we gain a much better appreciation for its setting in antiquity and the veracity of its characters and events. Using a comparative approach, Nibley demonstrates that the Book of Abraham contains a number of themes—such as idolatry, child sacrifice, the threat to Abraham’s life, and astronomy—not found in the Old Testament and finds “striking parallels in the apocryphal Abraham literature” (p. 648).

In his discussions of the Book of Abraham, Nibley not only takes us deep into the Egyptian world of Pharaoh’s court but also analyzes Egyptian connections to Ham, Egyptus, and the Egyptian skill of bee-keeping. Nibley concludes that the Book of Abraham has propelled Latter-day Saint understanding of Abraham well beyond the scholarship of his day.

My colleague Daniel C. Peterson likens Nibley to an eager and curious antique collector who discovers a home filled with antique collectibles in every room. With youthful excitement he rushes from room to room jotting down notes with each new find. One room may require a knowledge of Egyptian, another Hebrew or Arabic, and yet another Greek, German, or French. Nibley’s research on the Book of Abraham has laid a foundation in each of these areas. However, successive scholars must now painstakingly plod through each of these rooms and make necessary revisions, corrections, or updates. Thanks to pioneering works such as *Abraham in Egypt*, Abraham research today stands on a much firmer foundation.