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**Title** A Powerful New Resource for Studying the Book of Abraham

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**Abstract** Review of *Traditions about the Early Life of Abraham* (2001), compiled and edited by John A. Tvednes, Brian M. Hauglid, and John Gee.

## A POWERFUL NEW RESOURCE FOR STUDYING THE BOOK OF ABRAHAM

E. Douglas Clark

John Tvedtnes, Brian Hauglid, and John Gee, compilers and editors of *Traditions about the Early Life of Abraham*, deserve deep gratitude from every Latter-day Saint who loves Abraham and loves studying his life. This big, beautifully bound volume constitutes a veritable treasure trove of Abrahamic lore and legend preserved in a wide variety of texts from early Jewish, Christian, Islamic, and other sources—enough to keep us busy comparing and contemplating for quite some time.

Why such material is or should be of interest to Latter-day Saints is well explained by the authors in a thoughtful introduction in which they demonstrate that, beginning with the Prophet Joseph Smith himself shortly after the publication of the Book of Abraham, early church leaders open-mindedly examined the few additional ancient texts available to them for possible further information about Abraham, the one whose covenant they were conscious of fulfilling and whose example they were commanded to follow. “Do the works of Abraham,”

Review of John A. Tvedtnes, Brian M. Hauglid, and John Gee, comps. and eds. *Traditions about the Early Life of Abraham*. Provo, Utah: FARMS, 2001. xxxviii + 565 pp., with appendixes and indexes. \$49.95.

the Lord commanded the church through Joseph Smith (D&C 132:32; see 101:4–5).

This imperative continues, as President Spencer W. Kimball reminded the Saints in his First Presidency message entitled “The Example of Abraham.”<sup>1</sup> That example shines forth with pristine splendor, of course, in the Book of Abraham itself, a straightforward historical record that marks the path to perfection by showing Abraham “strictly obeying all God’s commandments (see Abraham 3:25); diligently seeking righteousness and peace (see Abraham 1:2); making and keeping sacred covenants (see Abraham 2:6–13); receiving the priesthood and sacred ordinances (see Abraham 1:2 and Facsimile 2); building a family unit (Abraham 2:2); searching the scriptures (see Abraham 1:31); keeping journals and records (see Abraham 1:31); sharing the gospel (see Abraham 2:15); and proving faithful in the face of opposition (see Abraham 1:5–15 and Facsimile 1).”<sup>2</sup>

The Book of Abraham further contains revelations to the patriarch of the panorama of humanity’s origin and destiny, including the *raison d’être* of mortal existence. From our premortal beginnings in God’s presence, we are sent into mortality to be “prove[n] . . . to see if [we] will do all things whatsoever the Lord [our] God shall command [us]” (Abraham 3:25) so that we can “have glory added upon [our] heads for ever and ever” (Abraham 3:26). Parley Pratt noted that in Abraham’s record “we see . . . unfolded our eternal being—our existence before the world was—our high and responsible station in the councils of the Holy One, and our eternal destiny.”<sup>3</sup>

No wonder Wilford Woodruff felt so privileged to assist in the coming forth of this ancient record, as he expressed when he helped set the type for its maiden publication: “The truths of the Book of Abraham are truly edifying great & glorious which are among the

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1. Spencer W. Kimball, “The Example of Abraham,” *Ensign*, June 1975, 2–7.

2. E. Douglas Clark, foreword to Hugh Nibley, *Abraham in Egypt*, 2nd ed. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 2000), xxi.

3. Parley P. Pratt, “Editorial Remarks,” *Millennial Star* 3 (1 August 1842): 70.

rich treasures that are revealed unto us in the last days,”<sup>4</sup> causing “our hearts to burn within us while we behold their glorious truths opened unto us.”<sup>5</sup>

With this knowledge that authentic Abrahamic traditions had survived outside the corpus of the biblical text, Wilford Woodruff was naturally open to considering other Abrahamic lore in sources like the *Book of Jasher*, one of the few ancient nonbiblical texts then available. In a public sermon to the Saints in 1865, he referred to an Abrahamic tradition from *Jasher*.<sup>6</sup> Wilford was familiar, of course, with the revelation to Joseph Smith about the authenticity of noncanonical Bible-related texts, a revelation declaring the Apocrypha to contain a mixture of both truth and fiction capable of being accurately sifted only through the help of the Spirit (see D&C 91:1–6). That Wilford Woodruff—a spiritual giant if there ever was one—would preach about an Abrahamic legend in the noncanonical *Book of Jasher* should tell us something.

Since Wilford Woodruff’s day a remarkable thing has happened. Other ancient Bible-related texts, once widely circulated but for many centuries forgotten, have come forth in great numbers from caves, graves, archives, libraries, and monasteries around the world. The emergence of such texts has amazed scholars like Samuel Sandmel, who declared in one of the forewords to the massive two-volume set of Old Testament pseudepigrapha published in the 1980s: “By the strangest quirk of fate respecting literature that I know of, large numbers of writings by Jews were completely lost from the transmitted Jewish heritage. . . . Now . . . a door is being opened anew to treasures that are very old.”<sup>7</sup> These texts are part of what Hugh Nibley has referred to as that “astonishing outpouring

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4. Scott G. Kenney, ed., *Wilford Woodruff’s Journal: 1833–1898 Typescript* (Midvale, Utah: Signature Books, 1983), 2:159, 19 March 1842.

5. *Ibid.*, 2:155, 19 February 1842.

6. *Journal of Discourses*, 11:244.

7. Samuel Sandmel, “Foreword for Jews,” in *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, ed. James H. Charlesworth (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1983), 1:xi, xiii.

of ancient writings that is the peculiar blessing of our generation.”<sup>8</sup> Nibley should know, having long delved into these texts from the time he pioneered Abrahamic research in a series of articles published in the *Improvement Era* during the late 1960s and early 1970s.<sup>9</sup> It is only appropriate that *Traditions about the Early Life of Abraham* is dedicated to Hugh Nibley.

*Traditions* presents a wide variety of ancient writings that relate to our Book of Abraham, all in English translation. A number of these texts have been translated by the editors themselves. Scholars and lay readers alike will appreciate having these diverse and, in many instances, hard-to-locate texts collected under one cover. A feature particularly useful for the lay reader unfamiliar with these sources is the introductory material preceding each text and explaining something of its origin and provenance. The book even includes selected Abrahamic artwork from ancient sources, an intriguing bonus. (I would point out one minor error: the explanation on page 528 to the illustration from the Cotton Genesis says that the picture represents God commanding Abraham to go to Haran. Actually, according to Princeton’s publication of the Cotton Genesis, this picture represents God commanding Abraham to *leave* Haran.)<sup>10</sup> Enhancing the utility of this useful tome are three indexes, including not only a subject index and a scriptural citation index, but also an index of themes and events from the Book of Abraham, referenced by page number to the texts in the book.

As with any publication of this nature, there are a few inherent limitations and cautions. The editors themselves point out that the collection does not claim to be comprehensive. In addition, the texts have been included on the basis of their manifest apparent, obvious, clear relevance to the Book of Abraham narrative, a criterion

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8. Hugh Nibley, *Enoch the Prophet* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1986), 95.

9. Hugh Nibley, “A New Look at the Pearl of Great Price,” *Improvement Era*, January 1968–May 1970.

10. Kurt Weitzmann and Herbert L. Kessler, *The Cotton Genesis: British Library Codex Cotton Otho B.VI* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986), 72 and plates 2 and 166.

that may omit texts (or portions thereof) whose relevance may be significant but not apparent at first blush. Further, readers generally unfamiliar with this material may tend to conclude that the authenticity of a tradition depends on how frequently it occurs throughout the texts included in the book. In fact, some of the most archaic and important Abrahamic traditions are like rare gems, found only in obscure and unique texts, while it may be the case that spurious traditions are oft repeated.

Even so, in *Traditions* we have been given a resource of such magnitude that it could have been compiled only by scholars who love Father Abraham, reminding us of the divine promise given to him, as recorded in the Book of Abraham: “As many as receive this Gospel . . . shall be accounted thy seed, and shall rise up and bless thee, as their father” (Abraham 2:10). We will long remain in the editors’ debt as we use their book to discover more about the works of Abraham and thereby qualify to be his seed.

