Council, Chaos, and Creation in the Book of Abraham

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Abstract: The Book of Abraham in the Pearl of Great Price depicts the creation, including the motifs of the divine council, primeval chaos, and creation from preexisting matter. This depiction fits nicely in an ancient Near Eastern cultural background and has strong affinities with the depiction of the cosmos found in the Hebrew Bible and other ancient Near Eastern texts (especially Egyptian and Mesopotamian).
Nun, the god of the primeval waters (though the waters are not represented in this colorful depiction), lifts a ship bearing the scarab beetle, who is pushing the rising sun, symbolic of birth and transition. Book of the Dead of Anhai (ca. 1050 BC).
Traditionally, though not uniformly, Christianity and Judaism have relegated all references to gods other than the One God to pagan idolatry. Stephen Smoot, using more recent scholarship on the scriptural anomalies that do seem to assume other divine beings, compares this vast body of material to the statements in the Book of Abraham accounts of the creation. Thereby, he places the Abrahamic creation story squarely within its ancient (read: theologically nontraditional) Near Eastern context.
councilors sat at the head in yonder heavens and contemplated the creation of the worlds which were created at the time. . . . In the beginning, the head of the Gods called a council of the Gods; and they came together and concocted [prepared] a plan to create the world and people it.9

Many passages from the Hebrew Bible demonstrate the presence of a divine plurality. The textbook example from the Hebrew Bible is Psalm 82, which Michael S. Heiser uses as his primary text to assert that “it is not difficult to demonstrate that the Hebrew Bible assumes and affirms the existence of other gods.”10 This psalm vividly depicts God (ʾĕlōhîm) in his place “in the divine council [ba-ʾădat ʾēl]; in the midst of the gods [bĕ-qereb ʾĕlōhîm] he holds judgment” (Psalm 82:1 NRSV). 11 After reprimanding these gods for neglecting their duty to protect the vulnerable of humanity, God affirms the divine nature of the members of the council while simultaneously issuing a dire threat should they persist in their malfeasance. “I say, ‘You are gods [ʾĕlōhîm], children of the most high [bĕnê ʾelyôn], all of you; nevertheless, you shall die like mortals, and fall like any prince” (Psalm 82:6–7 NRSV).

The Hebrew uses the first person common plural prefix on ʾāšḥ, as well as the first person common plural suffix on both ʾlm and dmût, which are the equivalent of the English first person plural pronoun us and the first person plural possessive determiner our, respectively.

The use of the plural in these verses may leave some modern readers perplexed. After all, such seems to indicate a pluralistic depiction of God contrary to modern Judeo-Christian theological sensitivities. Christians therefore routinely read the Trinity into these verses, or, along with Jewish readers, suggest a “plurality of majesty” to account for the presence of the plural.12

Contrary to these common readings of the plurals in Genesis 1:26–27, scholars have recognized the presence of the divine council in this text. According to David M. Carr, the plural in these verses “probably refers to the divine beings who compose God’s heavenly court.”13 Everett Fox mentions in passing that “some take [Genesis 1:26] to refer to the heavenly court.”14 Jon D. Levenson, providing commentary in an authoritative study Bible, writes, “The plural construction (Let us . . . ) most likely reflects a setting in the divine council. . . . God the King announces the proposed course of action to His cabinet of subordinate deities.”15 Robert Hendel similarly notes, “The plural seems to refer to the lesser deities of the divine assembly described in other biblical texts.”16 Marc Zvi Brettler informs us, “[Genesis 1:26–27] is implicitly portraying God in terms of a human king: God is talking to his royal counselors or cabinet. . . . The creation of people is so significant that this creative act alone demands God consult his cabinet, [composed] of angels or other divine figures.”17 Finally, Gerald Cooke acknowledges “at least a strong possibility that [Genesis 1:26–27] represent[s] a conception of a plurality of divine beings.”18

Examples of God’s heavenly court in the Hebrew Bible could be multiplied (e.g., Genesis 3:22; Deuteronomy 32:8–9, 43; 1 Kings 22:19–23; Isaiah 6:1-4; 40:1-5; Job 1:6-12; 2:1-6). The divine council is likewise present, with some conceptual differences, in the religious systems of Israel’s neighboring cultures, including Egypt and Mesopotamia. It is a thoroughly ancient Near Eastern concept that is usually only reluctantly or begrudgingly admitted by traditional Jewish and Christian exegetes as also being biblical.

On the other hand, the presence of the divine council in the Book of Abraham could not be more
explicit. Abraham, according to Abraham 3, was granted a vision that included viewing the assembled spirits that composed the premortal council.

Now the Lord had shown unto me, Abraham, the intelligences that were organized before the world was; and among all these there were many of the noble and great ones; And God saw these souls that they were good, and he stood in the midst of them, and he said: These I will make my rulers; for he stood among those that were spirits, and he saw that they were good. (Abraham 3:22–23)20

As David E. Bokovoy has explained, the detail that God “stood” in the midst of the council may seem trivial at first glance, but in fact contains important ramifications for the depiction of God as the head of the council.21 What’s more, the Book of Abraham’s identification of these preexistent intelligences of the council with the stars of heaven appears to be using language that is part of the cultural and religious environment of the ancient Near East (compare Abraham 3:16–18).22

Notwithstanding the somewhat unfortunately misplaced chapter division, the premortal council scene of Abraham 3 actually extends into Abraham 4–5. Instead of being a break in the narrative, the account of the creation in Abraham 4–5 should be read as an extension and continuation of the narrative in Abraham 3. That is to say, the divine council is introduced in Abraham 3 because it is the divine council that will carry out the creation in Abraham 4–5. The narrative informs us, “And then [i.e., immediately after the conflict in Abraham 3:27–28 is resolved and a course of action is selected] the Lord said: Let us go down. And they went down at the beginning, and they, that is the Gods, organized and formed the heavens and the earth” (Abraham 4:1).

The text proceeds to use the plural Gods as the subject carrying out the creation. There can be no doubt that these Gods include those from Abraham 3 whom the Lord in verse 1 instructed to accompany him and “go down” to carry forth the creation, in terminology perfectly suited for divine council imagery (compare Abraham 4:26–27; 5:4).23 But perhaps the most glaring detail in Abraham 4–5 that indicates the presence of the divine council is that the Gods are said to have taken “counsel among themselves” as they carried forth their creative acts (Abraham 4:26; compare 5:1–5), a detail not explicitly described in other scriptural creation accounts. This description of the Gods taking “counsel” among themselves during their creative deliberations is crucial in identifying the presence of the divine council in Abraham 4–5.

The explicit use of counsel to describe the actions of the Gods in Abraham 4 links it with the Hebrew noun sôd, which can be defined as both “council” as well as “counsel.” It conveys the sense of friends holding a private conversation in an intimate assembly or circle, as well as secrets that God imparts to his prophets (Amos 3:7),24 and is used in the Hebrew Bible to refer both to the divine council itself (cf. Psalm 89:6–7) as well as to the “counseling” that the gods do among themselves in the council.25

I hasten to clarify what I am not claiming. I am not claiming that the Book of Abraham employs the word sôd in describing the premortal council. Because we presently possess only an English rendering of the text, there remains, of course, the question of whether the Book of Abraham was originally written in Hebrew, Egyptian, or another ancient Near Eastern language.26 What I am claiming, however, is that narrative details in the Book of Abraham grant us confidence to conclude that the text shares a conceptualization of God’s sôd similar to that of the Hebrew Bible’s. As we’ve just seen, the Book of Abraham presents a depiction of the divine council that includes assemblage of its members (Abraham 3:22–23), deliberation or conflict (Abraham 3:27–28), a decree from the chief (Abraham 3:27), and an ultimate enactment of the decree (Abraham 4:1). This is the same pattern we see in divine council narratives in the Hebrew Bible and elsewhere.27

One important aspect of a number of Egyptian creation myths is the motif of primordial water from which the earth, or, more properly, a primeval hill or landmass, springs out of.

“Empty and Desolate”: The Primordial Chaos

Genesis 1:2 informs us that at the creation “the earth was a formless void” and that “darkness covered the face of the deep,” while the Book of Abraham indicates that “the earth, after it was formed, was empty and desolate” and that “darkness reigned upon the
face of the deep” (Abraham 4:2). The Hebrew of Genesis 1:2 uses highly technical vocabulary to describe this “formless void.” The earth at the time of creation, according to the Hebrew text, was tōhū wā-bōhū. The New Revised Standard Version quoted above offers a perfectly acceptable translation, while E. A. Speiser translates the phrase as “a formless waste.” Douglas A. Knight and Amy-Jill Levine argue that “a formless void” is an appropriate translation of this idiom, and commentary provided by the New Interpreter’s Bible speaks of tōhū wā-bōhū as “something desolate and unproductive.” Finally, Gordon J. Wenham suggests that “unproductive and uninhabited” is the underlying meaning of tōhū wā-bōhū. Regardless of the precise translation, tōhū wā-bōhū thus seems to be a description of chaos.

But what are we to understand in Genesis 1:1–3 and Abraham 4:1–2 by “the deep” (tĕhôm) upon which “darkness” (ʾōšek) covered? Bendt Alster identifies tĕhôm as “the primeval sea” that “denotes the cosmic sea on which the world rests.” Allen P. Ross concurs, noting that tĕhôm “refers to the salty deep, the ocean, and thereby figuratively to the abyss . . . the primeval ocean.” Fox simply designates tĕhôm as “the primeval waters, a common (and usually divine) image in ancient Near Eastern mythology.” This identification of tĕhôm as primeval water is supported later in the verse, where we read that the spirit, or wind, of God (rûaʾ ʾĕlōhîm) swept over “the waters [ha-māim]” at the beginning of God’s creation.

To help us better understand the precise nature of tĕhôm, we diverge briefly from the Hebrew Bible to examine an important cognate of tĕhôm in the celebrated Babylonian creation myth and temple liturgy Enuma Elish. As Alster explains, tĕhôm is related to the Akkadian Tiamat, who in the Enuma Elish is an evil goddess conquered by the god Marduk and whose spoiled carcass becomes the primordial cosmic ocean at the creation of the world (4.125–46). Since its discovery and translation in the late nineteenth century, scholars have recognized the shared cosmological conceptions between Genesis 1 and the Enuma Elish. Although a direct dependence between the two creation mythologies cannot be maintained, and several significantly different cosmological conceptualizations exist between the two myths, it is apparent that the Israelites and Babylonians (as well as other surrounding ancient Near Eastern cultures, for that matter) shared many commonalities in their
creation mythologies, including the depiction of deity overcoming chaos by bringing it into order through either a cosmic battle or divine fiat.\textsuperscript{38}

Also significant for Latter-day Saints is the *Enuma Elish*’s depiction of the primeval theomachy in the council of the gods, wherein Tiamat and her evil host of warrior gods battle against Marduk for reign over the divine council and, ultimately, the cosmos (3–4.129).\textsuperscript{39} The motif of a primeval theomachy in the divine council likewise appears in the Book of Abraham, in this instance between the premortal Jehovah and Satan over the agency of mankind (Abraham 3:22–28; compare Moses 4:1–4). Again, this is not to say that the Book of Abraham and the *Enuma Elish* are drawing directly on each other but rather to note the common presence of this motif in ancient Near Eastern creation mythology.\textsuperscript{40}

The Egyptians shared a similar cosmological outlook with their Semitic neighbors. For example, one important aspect of a number of Egyptian creation myths is the motif of primordial water from which the earth, or, more properly, a primeval hill or landmass, springs out of. Ian Shaw and Paul Nicholson, for example, write about the “creator-god and solar deity” Atum (later Atum-Rê), who, in the creation mythology of Heliopolis, came into being by “rising up from Nun, the waters of chaos,” and thus became the “primeval mound.”\textsuperscript{41} Günter Burkard identifies Nun as the “primeval ocean,” whom he describes as being “chaotic, unorganized” and “preexisting.”\textsuperscript{42}

Similar creation myths that involve the earth being formed out of chaotic primeval water are also found at Memphis and Hermopolis, both associated with their respective deities.\textsuperscript{53}

But besides just conceptualizing creation from primordial matter, it is apparent that the Egyptians likewise conceived of creation as consisting of the establishment of order. James P. Allen writes about the importance of Maat in Egyptian cosmology as a “force of nature” that was “established at the creation.” Allen explains that Maat is “the natural order of the universe” that “on a cosmic level governed the proper functioning of the universe.” Maat should therefore be understood as “order,” “justice,” and “truth.” The opposite of Maat is *jzft*, which represents chaos, disorder, or disharmony and is generated by unruly humans. These two forces are constantly at war with each other in Egyptian cosmology. It is the duty, particularly of the pharaoh, to preserve Maat in Egyptian society and thus keep chaos at bay. By doing so the pharaoh is imitating “the creator who established a balanced universe.”\textsuperscript{64}

What we therefore have in these mythologies is a conception of creation in which a deity fashions chaotic, watery mass into order. The conquering of chaos depicts the deity as the rightful, mighty king over his newly fashioned cosmos. This is true also for the biblical depiction of creation (which shouldn’t come as a surprise, given, as explained earlier, that Genesis shares cosmological conceptions
similar to those of other Near Eastern cultures). Adele Berlin and Brettler, for example, have pointed out that Psalm 24:1-2, “a hymn celebrating God, creator and victor,” echoes the depiction in Genesis 1:1-3, wherein “God tamed the primeval waters and founded the earth upon them (Ps. 136.6); He is therefore to be acknowledged as the supreme sovereign of the world.”

Robert A. Oden Jr. indicates that the depiction of the “formless void” in Genesis 1 is that of “watery and dark undifferentiated matter” that “existed prior to the formation of a structured cosmos,” and J. H. Hertz helpfully explains that Genesis 1:1-3 describes “the reduction of chaos to ordered arrangement.” Along these lines, J. R. Porter comments that Genesis 1 follows the ancient Near Eastern depiction of a “deity’s victory over the forces of chaos, represented by threatening waters, as a result of which the god is established as a supreme king.”

The Book of Abraham’s portrait of creation from primordial water is consistent with the Near Eastern myths we have seen above. The text speaks of “the deep” upon which darkness “reign[ed]” as “the Spirit of the Gods was brooding upon the face of the waters” (Abraham 4:2). Eventually we’re informed that “the Gods ordered, saying: Let the waters under the heaven be gathered together unto one place, and let the earth come up dry” out of them (Abraham 4:9). These waters from which the earth arises out of are the primeval waters that the Gods commanded to be divided by placing “an expanse in the midst” of them (Abraham 4:6).

That the Gods in the Book of Abraham overcame a previously ruling chaos to establish their own dominion can be seen in the text’s usage of the word reign to describe the position of the chaotic darkness before the Gods fashioned the cosmos (Abraham 4:2). What is more, the Book of Abraham’s creation account portrays the Gods in much more regal terms than that of Genesis. Thus, we read of the Gods forcefully “ordering” this or that aspect of the cosmos, which obligingly “obey” when commanded (Abraham 4:7, 9-12, 18, 21, 25). The language in the Book of Abraham conjures the same imagery typical of the Near Eastern creation mythology we have reviewed—namely, that of kingly dominion establishing order over a previously chaotic cosmos.

“We Will Take of These Materials”: Creation ex materia

In close conjunction with the concept of God fashioning an ordered cosmos out of chaotic matter is the concept that God created the earth not ex nihilo, or out of nothing, but rather ex materia, or from preexisting matter. It is therefore not surprising that creation ex materia is present in the Genesis and Abraham accounts of creation. Unfailingly throughout Abraham 4 and 5 the verbs organize and form are used to describe the creative activity of the Gods. The presence of preexistent matter that the Gods form and organize is also apparent. “We will go down,” says God in the prologue to the Book of Abraham’s creation account, “for there is space there, and we will take of these materials, and we will make an earth whereon these [speaking of the preexistent intelligences] may dwell” (Abraham 3:24). Commenting on this verse, Richard D. Draper, S. Kent Brown, and Michael D. Rhodes explain, “The earth and its solar system were not created ex nihilo, out of nothing, as traditional Christianity teaches, but from existing matter. . . . The elements that are the building blocks of the Creation have always existed.” Indeed, Speiser argues that, despite “the theological and philosophical implications” of Genesis 1 speaking of “coexistent matter,” “the text should be allowed to speak for itself.”

Of crucial importance is the verb used by God in the first verse of Genesis. The verb in Hebrew is bārā; it is highly unique, occurring only about fifty times.
and being used only by God in the Hebrew Bible. Although it is often rendered as “create” in various translations, another meaning of the word could also be to “form” or “fashion.” John H. Walton writes that the verb *bārā* in Genesis 1:1 most likely means giving the aforementioned (see above) primordial chaos “a function or a role within an ordered cosmos.” Walter Brueggemann similarly clarifies that the concept of creation in Genesis is that of “an ordering out of an already existing chaos.” As Walton elaborates, concerning the concept of creation in the Hebrew Bible and ancient Near Eastern thought,

something is brought into existence functionally, not necessarily materially; rarely would the statement concern the issue of matter. Indeed, the text never uses *bara’* in a context in which materials are mentioned. Thus instead of suggesting manufacture of matter out of nothing (as many have inferred in the past), that materials are not mentioned suggests that manufacture is not the issue.

Latter-day Saint scholar Kevin L. Barney explains that “the verb *bārā* seems to be used in the sense of shaping or fashioning.” To illustrate, Walton compares God’s act of creating in Genesis 1:1 as that of a human creating a painting. “One can create a piece of art, but that expression does not suggest manufacture of the canvas or paint.” In his monumental King Follett discourse, Joseph Smith insightfully compared the process of creation in Genesis 1:1 to that of building a ship.

Now, the word create came from the word baurau (*bārā*) which does not mean to create out of nothing; it means to organize; the same as a man would organize materials and build a ship. Hence, we infer that God had materials to organize the world out of chaos—chaotic matter, which is element, and in which dwells all the glory.

Joseph’s views on this point are not far removed from those of biblical scholars such as Brettler, who indicates that the creation account in Genesis “does not describe creation out of nothing. . . . Primeval stuff already exists in [Genesis 1], and the text shows no concern for how it originated. Rather, it is a myth about how God alone structured primordial matter into a highly organized world.” Fox straightforwardly comments, “Gen. 1 describes God’s bringing order out of chaos, not creation from nothingness.”

Barney similarly concludes that “the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* is . . . nowhere attested in the Hebrew Bible,” and “the historical evidence strongly favors Joseph Smith’s rejection of creation *ex nihilo* in his reading of Genesis 1:1.”

Thus, to read the concept of creation *ex nihilo* into the text of Genesis 1:1 is to wrest this account out of its primary ideological and historical context. Although Jewish and Christian theologians have gone to great pains to try to demonstrate the presence of creation *ex nihilo* in the biblical text, it simply does not exist. In this regard, as in the previous two, the Book of Abraham’s description of creation from primordial matter is right at home in the ancient Near East.

**“To Possess Greater Knowledge”: Conclusion**

The Book of Abraham invites its readers to drink deeply from its doctrinally rich pages. The narrative itself opens with Abraham expressing his heartfelt longing to become a greater possessor of truth and righteousness (Abraham 1:1–3; cf. 2:12–13). But besides having a doctrinal richness, the Book of Abraham also has strong ties with ancient Near Eastern, including particularly biblical, cosmology. Although questions still remain regarding the precise manner in which Joseph produced the Book of Abraham, including its relationship to the Egyptian papyri he received in 1835, and although questions remain as to how precisely Joseph’s study of Hebrew influenced his translation of the Book of Abraham,
there can be little doubt that the cosmological concepts in the Book of Abraham of the divine council, the conquering of chaos by the Gods, and creation from primordial matter fit nicely in the ancient world.

NOTES


gious Studies Center, 1980), 341, 345, 351, 358.


11. It must be remembered that both ʾădat ʾēl or ʾēl could be used as either a noun or an abstraction. This can, at times, confound readers as to which sense (nominal or abstract) is being used in a given passage. When no grammatical clues are present, the key is usually to rely on the context of the passage to govern the translation. For reasons too complex to relate here, I concur with the NRSV that “divine council” offers the “plurality of majesty” or “royal we” explanation as one possibility for explaining the plurals in Deuteronomy 32 that unmistakably show the presence of the divine council. See Martin Abegg Jr., Peter Flint, and Eugene Ulrich, eds., The Dead Sea Scrolls Bible (San Francisco: HarperOne, 1999), 191-93. For commentary, see Carmel McCarthy, Biblia Hebraica Quinta: Deuteronomy (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 2007), 140-41, 152-53.

12. J. R. Dummelow’s popular, though outdated, biblical commentary offers the “plurality of majesty” or “royal we” explanation as one possibility for explaining the plurals of Genesis 1:1-27. See A Commentary on the Holy Bible, ed. J. R. Dummelow (New York: Macmillan, 1920), 5. Stated briefly, the idea is that monarchs have been known in some instances to speak in the plural when referring to themselves, as a sign of excellence or nobility, and that this can account for the plural in the text. This explanation has been popular for some time among Christians and Jews, as well as among Latter-day Saints. See James E. Talmage, Jesus the Christ (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1915), 38.


19. Although not present in the Masoretic Text, due undoubtedly to scribal mangling, the Qumran manuscripts 4QDeut and 4QDeut² offer variant readings of these two passages in Deuteronomy 32 that unmistakably show the presence of the divine council. See Martin Abegg Jr., Peter Flint, and Eugene Ulrich, eds., The Dead Sea Scrolls Bible (San Francisco: HarperOne, 1999), 191-93. For commentary, see Carmel McCarthy, Biblia Hebraica Quinta: Deuteronomy (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 2007), 140-41, 152-53.

20. The Book of Abraham’s “noble and great ones” call to mind the Anunnaki of Mesopotamian religion, whom Jean Bottéro identifies as “the most powerful, the most eminent, and, in some ways, the upper class or ‘chiefs’ of the other [gods].” Jean Bottéro, Religion in Ancient Mesopotamia, trans. Teresa Lavender Fagan (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 55.


23. The same language is used in Genesis 11:7, where, after seeing the unfavorable conditions of humans operating with one language, Yahweh instructs his host: “Come, let us go down, and confuse their language.” As Levenson, “Genesis,” 29, indicates, “As in [Genesis] 1:26, the plural (let us) probably reflects an address to the divine council.”


26. There is also the theory that Joseph is the inspired author of a pseudepigraphal Book of Abraham composed in English in the nineteenth century. See, for example, Karl C. Sanberg, “Knowing Brother Joseph Again: The Book of Abraham and Joseph Smith as Translator,” Dialogue 22/4 (1989): 17-37. Sanberg’s argument is essentially that the Book of Abraham’s contents are derived from Joseph’s inspired, prophetic interaction with contemporary environmental sources (e.g., his study of Hebrew with Joshua Seixas, and his exposure to the writings of Flavius Josephus). It is not within the scope of this paper to scrutinize this or other theories of the Book of Abraham’s translation.


James D. G. Dunn (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003), 38.


35. Alster, “Tiamat,” 1634. Victor P. Hamilton simply calls *tēhôm* the “Hebraized form” of Tiamat. See Victor P. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 1-17* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1990), 110. Knight and Levine agree, observing that “the Hebrew word for ‘deep’ is *tēhôm*, a linguistic cognate to Tiamat, the Babylonian goddess of the salt seas. She represents the great abyss, the endless seas around and under the earth.” See Knight and Levine, *Meaning of the Bible*, 201. See also the insightful comments by Michael D. Coogan, *The Old Testament: A Historical and Literary Introduction to the Hebrew Scriptures* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 5–9, where he discusses both the divine council in Genesis as well as the relationship between *tēhôm* and Tiamat.


37. For instance, *tēhôm* is nowhere personified as being evil in Genesis 1, whereas Tiamat is consistently portrayed as such throughout the *Enuma Elish*.


45. “There is no doubt that the text [of Genesis] utilizes older materials. It reflects creation stories and cosmologies of Egypt and Mesoopotamia. However, the text before us transforms these older materials to serve a quite new purpose, a purpose most intimately related to Israel’s covenantal experience.” Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1982), 24, emphasis in original. J. J. M. Roberts similarly observes, “The closest parallels to the Israelite cosmogonic myth come from the Baal Epic at Ugarit—though the preserved Ugaritic texts do not explicitly tie Baal’s defeat of the sea dragon to creation—but there are

46. Berlin and Brettler, “Psalms,” in *Jewish Study Bible*, 1308, also 1434. See also Psalm 24:1-2.


50. Given what I’ve noted earlier (see n. 11), perhaps we could understand the “Spirit of the Gods” to mean “divine spirit.”

51. It should be remembered that the term *preexist* or *preexistence* (from the Latin *ex* “out” + *sistere* “take a stand”) means “pre-placement,” not necessarily “pre-being.”


58. Walton, *Ancient Near Eastern Thought*, 183. Walton has elsewhere written: “Ancient traditions do not typically begin with nothing. Instead, they start with a condition devoid of order, function or purpose. Creation then takes place by giving things order, function, and purpose, which is synonymous with giving them existence… Instead of suggesting manufacture of matter out of nothing (as many have inferred in the past)… *bārā* concerns bringing heaven and earth into existence by focusing on operation through organization and assignment of roles and functions. . . Perhaps an English verb that captures this idea less ambiguously is ‘to design.’” John H. Walton, “Creation,” in *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Pentateuch*, ed. T. Desmond Alexander and David W. Baker (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2003), 156, 162.


67. I am aware of the discussion of how Joseph’s study of Hebrew influenced the production of the Book of Abraham and am currently conducting my own research on the subject. That an influence exists is beyond question. For reasons too complex to discuss here, I am, however, hesitant to attribute too much of an influence to Joseph’s study of Hebrew beyond the transliteration and translation of some select phrases and words. I am highly doubtful that Joseph’s study of Hebrew alone would have vouchsafed the complex cosmological details discussed in this paper. Of course, one’s assumptions about the translation of the Book of Abraham (i.e., whether one believes Joseph translated an actual ancient text or composed the text by revelation) will in large part determine how one assesses the evidence.