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Abstract Review of *The Blessings of Abraham: Becoming a Zion People* (2005), by E. Douglas Clark.

“LOOK UNTO ABRAHAM YOUR FATHER”

Brian M. Hauglid

Look unto Abraham your father, and unto Sarah that bare you. (Isaiah 51:2)

Over the past few decades or so I have had the privilege of studying the life and teachings of Abraham, and it has been as interesting as it has been fulfilling in both my personal and professional life. The driving force behind my interest in Abraham was initially fueled by verses from Isaiah quoted in my patriarchal blessing: “Hearken unto me, ye that follow after righteousness. Look unto the rock from whence ye are hewn, and to the hole of the pit from whence ye are digged. Look unto Abraham, your father, and unto Sarah, she that bare you; for I called him alone, and blessed him” (2 Nephi 8:1–2; cf. Isaiah 51:1–2).

Since receiving this first inspired and personal emphasis on Abraham, which has continued to direct my life, others have helped me to see and appreciate Abraham in personal and uplifting ways. In my view, E. Douglas Clark’s book, *The Blessings of Abraham: Becoming a*

Review of E. Douglas Clark. *The Blessings of Abraham: Becoming a Zion People*. American Fork, UT: Covenant Communications, 2005. 331 pp., with appendix, chart, abbreviation lists, and bibliography. \$29.95.

Zion People, is worthy, with only a couple of reservations, to sit on my bookshelves beside other favorite works on Abraham.

Stylistic and Devotional Considerations

In the introduction to his book, Clark gives the main thesis: “Together Abraham and Sarah built Zion, and together they are to be remembered by their righteous posterity who aspire to build Zion. Together they teach us how to build Zion and qualify for the very blessings once bestowed on them for their faithfulness” (p. 26). For the next twelve chapters, which cover the life of Abraham from birth to death, Clark stays assiduously close to this purpose. His prose carries each event, concept, idea, principle, or doctrine smoothly and clearly forward. I found that this helped the book flow from one chapter to the next in a most satisfying and readable manner.

From a devotional perspective, Clark focuses on the best characteristics of Abraham (and Sarah) as he weaves together a tapestry of ancient Jewish, Christian, and Islamic lore in support of or expanding on the scriptural text. For instance, according to Abraham 1:31, Abraham learned the “knowledge of the beginning of the creation, and also of the planets, and of the stars.” Here Clark notes that Abraham had the Urim and Thummim and that rabbinic tradition evidences Abraham owning a “rare stone in which he could read a man’s destiny” (p. 113); also, in the *Apocalypse of Abraham*, Abraham prayed and “received revelation upon revelation teaching him about history, astronomy, theology, and science” (p. 114). To expand on this further, Clark uses Jewish tradition to demonstrate that Abraham “possessed great genius,” “spoke every tongue and mastered every art,” and “was the greatest scientist of his day” (p. 114).

Clark then builds on some of these ancient traditions with statements from modern scripture and prominent church leaders in order to apply learned gospel concepts and principles to the contemporary Latter-day Saint. As Abraham sought for his “appointment unto the Priesthood” (Abraham 1:4), according to President Spencer W. Kimball and President Ezra Taft Benson, so should every worthy male member of the church (p. 65); as Abraham was hospitable to all,

President Harold B. Lee and President Gordon B. Hinckley encourage us to show gratitude to God through our service to those in need (pp. 130–31); as Sarah was the great exemplar of patience and good motherhood, so, as Sheri Dew teaches, the sisters of the church should look to Sarah (pp. 167–68). Clark does not overuse statements by the Brethren, but instead inserts them at appropriate times for a spiritual lesson. On more than one occasion I found myself inspired, moved, and seeking to pattern my own life more on the example of Abraham. This one aspect alone made the book a worthwhile read for me. I also found that Clark provided many interesting bits of information and told the story of Abraham in an engaging manner. I feel the chapter on the Akedah (chap. 10), the binding of Isaac, is particularly insightful and instructive.

Academic Considerations

Clark's use of sources demonstrates an impressive knowledge of ancient Jewish, Christian, and Muslim lore. His use of secondary works and church sources also shows he has paid the price to fill this book with as much insightful and helpful information as possible. But his use of sources also raises some important questions: How should we use ancient lore with the scriptures? Can ancient nonscriptural accounts provide truth? And if so, how are we to sift through these traditions to find it? What kinds of criteria should we use to discriminate among these traditions? These issues need to be probed more fully at some point.

These were ever-present questions as research and writing progressed for *Traditions about the Early Life of Abraham*.¹ As we worked on that collection, we found that the Book of Abraham could not have been produced in the early nineteenth century—it contained too many themes and characteristics from antiquity. In other words, we were not trying to prove that the Book of Abraham was true. However,

1. John A. Tvedtnes, Brian M. Hauglid, and John Gee, eds., *Traditions about the Early Life of Abraham* (Provo, UT: FARMS, 2001).

it is apparent that it fits more comfortably in the ancient world than in Joseph Smith's time period.

I do not believe that Clark is trying to prove the truth of the Book of Abraham, but he does sometimes cite ancient tradition in support of weak assumptions not confirmed in the scriptures. Concerning Enoch, for instance, Clark argues from ancient lore that Enoch saved Abraham from near death on the altar (p. 77), ordained Abraham to the patriarchal priesthood (p. 84), inspired Abraham to desire translation (to Enoch's city) (p. 92), presided over the sacrifice in Genesis 15 (pp. 147–48), and stayed Abraham's hand from sacrificing Isaac (p. 221). Of course, none of this is specifically supported in the scriptures.

The reader should also be aware that ancient sources are used indiscriminately throughout the book. No attempt is made to evaluate which sources may be more reliable than others. Sometimes a source will appear to be cited as if it were the true account. Could the number of converts in Haran reach the thousands because the *Book of Jasher* says it was seventy-two (heads of families) (p. 87)? Did Pharaoh in Abraham's day really convert to the gospel, according to a Samaritan and a late Muslim account, so that possibly widespread conversions occurred in Egypt (p. 121)? Does Rashi (like many later commentators faced with difficult verses) take liberty in rescuing Sarah from her harshness against Hagar in Genesis 16:5 (pp. 162–63)? Does Martin Luther give the correct interpretation of Sarah's "laugh" in Genesis 18:11–12 (p. 176)? How correct is the obscure Jewish tradition that says that Sarah had no hatred for Ishmael? Could this be, as commonly happened, a later "improvement" on the text made by commentators sympathetic to Sarah (p. 196)?

Later rabbinic, Christian, and Muslim commentators often expanded on the scriptural text because, in most cases, the sacred text leaves room for conjecture and speculation. For the biblical scholar these traditions serve to provide a peek into the world of the commentator and how the scriptural text was once viewed by redactors. To determine if a certain tradition in a nonbiblical text is factual, however, is difficult. A good starting point for this type of investigation is the work of James Kugel in volumes such as *Traditions of the Bible*:

A Guide to the Bible as It Was at the Start of the Common Era and *In Potiphar's House: The Interpretive Life of Biblical Texts*.

The Blessings of Abraham is not a scholarly work that painstakingly sifts through these many traditions, thus making a distinction between the reliable and unreliable. Therefore, the reader should be cautioned in accepting these traditions wholesale. My advice is to read them for the feel and flow of Abraham's life but with an appropriate grain of salt.

Although not a serious concern, I noticed other weaknesses in the book. For example, we know, according to Abraham 1:31, that Abraham had records from which he learned about astronomy. Does this mean, as Clark suggests (p. 71), that Abraham had access to *our* version of the Book of Moses account about Enoch? This could imply that our version is a direct translation from a text that would have existed during the time of Abraham. However, we have no clear evidence of this. Phrases such as "Abraham would have read" (pp. 71, 72, 77, 78, 79) or "Abraham may well have recognized" (p. 74) denote the shakiness of the assumption. I have noted above other examples of weak assumptions connected to questions of source reliability and discrimination.

However, this is a good book. If Clark wrote it to give an inspirational and uplifting view of Abraham and Sarah, he has succeeded. But readers should not accept all that the ancient Jewish, Christian, and Islamic traditions say as true and factual.

