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**Abstract** Review of *A Study Guide to the Facsimiles of the Book of Abraham* (2006), by Allen J. Fletcher.

# A METHOD FOR STUDYING THE FACSIMILES

John Gee

Review of Allen J. Fletcher. *A Study Guide to the Facsimiles of the Book of Abraham*. Springville, UT: Cedar Fort, 2006. xi + 160 pp., with bibliography. \$12.99.

The facsimiles from the Book of Abraham continue to fascinate, if only by their strangeness. The only illustrations in our scriptures, they attract attention not only because of their rough-hewn quality but by their very existence as a visual medium in the midst of the written word. Their unusual origin and foreign iconography make them the source of endless uninformed speculation. Thus it is as a guide to these strange facsimiles that Allen J. Fletcher puts himself forward.

## The Approach

The question that is constantly asked about the facsimiles is how Joseph Smith's interpretations match those of the ancient Egyptians. Fletcher goes through the facsimiles, figure by figure, and asks three questions: (1) "What does this figure represent in the world of the Egyptians?" (2) "What meaning is given to this figure by the Prophet Joseph Smith or Abraham?" and (3) "If we look at this Egyptian figure as an imitation, what gospel principles can we see in it?" These are good questions. Not everyone, however, will answer them the same way.

The answers to the second question are generally straightforward even if one might have quibbles with Fletcher's particular interpretations. Fletcher's answers to the third question are homiletics on which

I will take the Book of Mormon position that “every thing which inviteth to do good, and to persuade to believe in Christ, is sent forth by the power and gift of Christ” (Moroni 7:16), and I will thus refrain from critiquing them. It is Fletcher’s answers to the first question with which I disagree (and they, of course, have a direct impact on the basis for Fletcher’s homiletics). I disagree with his answers because I disagree with many of Fletcher’s assumptions and his method. I shall not analyze most of his assumptions here but will, instead, focus on his method.

### Towards a Methodology for Studying the Facsimiles

Fletcher’s method for understanding the facsimiles from the ancient Egyptian point of view is simply arbitrary. Fletcher has fallen into a common trap when dealing with the facsimiles from an Egyptological view. We want to know: does X (the interpretation of Joseph Smith) equal Y (the interpretation of the ancient Egyptians)? But in reality the question is usually modified slightly by asking: does X (the interpretation of Joseph Smith) equal Z (the interpretation of modern Egyptologists)? As I have already tacitly demonstrated elsewhere (at least for Facsimile 2), Z (the interpretation of modern Egyptologists) usually does not equal Y (the interpretation of the ancient Egyptians).<sup>1</sup> Z is therefore irrelevant. Of the twenty-seven interpretations that Fletcher gives for the figures in the facsimiles (pp. 25–30), only two are certainly correct while eight are certainly wrong; the remainder are quite likely wrong. At the present time, it is perhaps more important that we determine a method for ascertaining what the ancient Egyptians who drew the facsimiles might have understood by them. I published this methodology some time ago. While I wrote about hypocephali in particular, the same methodology needs to be followed for all of the facsimiles. The methodology comprises four steps:

*Step 1.* If we wish to understand the iconography of the facsimiles, we must pay careful attention to those instances in which the ancient

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1. John Gee, “Towards an Interpretation of Hypocephali,” in “*Le lotus qui sort du terre*”: *Mélanges offerts à Edith Varga*, Bulletin du Musée Hongrois des Beaux-Arts Supplément-2001 (Budapest: Musée Hongrois des Beaux-Arts, 2001), 325–34.

Egyptians actually identify a figure.<sup>2</sup> As a result, we must gather various examples of parallels to the facsimiles and determine when, if ever, the figures are identified.<sup>3</sup> All the various parallels need to come from the time period of the facsimiles and not thousands of years earlier in the New Kingdom, Middle Kingdom, or Old Kingdom. The parallels should be as close as possible, preferably having at least half of the figures in common with the facsimiles. If, after gathering various parallels to the facsimiles, some figures are still unidentified, any identifications we assign them will be merely guesses.

*Step 2.* “Identification of the figure will not tell us what the ancient Egyptians understood by the figure. That understanding will only come as we assemble information from ancient Egyptian sources of the proper time. Sources from the Old Kingdom, Middle Kingdom, and New Kingdom are only of secondary value to understanding what is meant by Egyptian of Saite or Greco-Roman times of the same figures.”<sup>4</sup> As most handbooks on iconography and religion deal principally with the New Kingdom or earlier periods, they are of little to no use in understanding the facsimiles.

*Step 3.* The various figures are placed in relationship to each other for a reason. One ought, therefore, to pay attention to the placement of the figures. In this regard, explanations in Greco-Roman sources that mention relationships between the figures might be of some importance.<sup>5</sup> We should strive not only to be able to identify a particular figure but also to be able to understand why two figures are placed in a particular relationship in the facsimiles.

*Step 4.* One should endeavor, where possible, to match the identified figures with the texts that relate to them, whether adjoining or not.<sup>6</sup>

Fletcher has followed none of these steps. His arguments and conclusions on the subject are methodologically invalid. But he is in good

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2. Gee, “Towards an Interpretation of Hypocephali,” 330.

3. For this first step applied to hypocephali, see Gee, “Towards an Interpretation of Hypocephali,” 332–34.

4. Gee, “Towards an Interpretation of Hypocephali,” 330. I have changed one article in the quotation from definite to indefinite.

5. Gee, “Towards an Interpretation of Hypocephali,” 331.

6. Gee, “Towards an Interpretation of Hypocephali,” 331.

company, since to date few Egyptologists have produced a methodologically valid explanation of the facsimiles, as an explanation either of the facsimiles or of the class of objects and parallel vignettes. Thus the substitution of X=Z for X=Y is particularly pernicious.

A table showing the differences of interpretation by various authors using different methods might illustrate the difference that the proper method can make. The table gives published identifications of hypocephali (Facsimile 2) from Louis Speleers,<sup>7</sup> Edith Varga,<sup>8</sup> ancient Egyptian identifications,<sup>9</sup> and Fletcher (pp. 27–29):

**Table 1. Various Interpretations of the Figures in Facsimile 2**

	Speelers (1943)	Varga (1998)	Ancient Egyptian Identifications in Gee (2001)	Fletcher (2006) (pp. 27–29)
<b>Figure 1</b>	the soul of Re and his three forms	quadripartite ram-headed deity	soul coming into being ( <i>b3 m hpr</i> ) / lord in dread ( <i>nb m šfy</i> ) [the two labels are both found on the same hypocephalus]	Khnum
<b>Figure 2</b>	he who is in his disk / he who projects his rays	the one who created himself	belonging to the life of salvation ( <i>ny-ḥnh-w3d.t</i> ) / I know; I am known ( <i>iw rh-y iw rh.kw</i> ) [the two labels are found on different hypocephali]	Amon-Ra
<b>Figure 3</b>	Horakhte	the lord of the divine ship	Isis, Nephthys, and Kheperi ( <i>is.t, nb.t-ḥw.t, ḥpri</i> )	Ra
<b>Figure 4</b>	Sokaris	[unidentified]	Bibiou ( <i>b3-b3.w</i> )	Sokar
<b>Figure 5</b>	Mehetweret or Hathor	a cow	the great cow who bore the sun ( <i>ih.t wr.t ms r'</i> )	Hathor
<b>Figure 6</b>	the four sons of Horus	the four sons of Horus	Imseti, Hapi, Duamutef, Qebehsenuf ( <i>imstī, ḥpy, dw3-mw.t=f, qbh-sn.w=f</i> )	the four sons of Horus
<b>Figure 7</b>	Nehebkau and the deceased	the Lord of the Universe and Nehebkau	the great god ( <i>nṯr 3</i> )	Min-Horus
<b>Figures 22–23</b>	two lunar genies	baboons	baboons ( <i>httyw</i> )	the apes of the dawn

7. Louis Speleers, “Le sens de nos deux hypocéphales égyptiens,” *Bulletin des Musées Royaux d’Art et d’Histoire* 1 (1943): 35–37.

8. Edith Varga, *Napkorong a fej alatt* (Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó, 1998), 140–44.

9. Gee, “Towards an Interpretation of Hypocephali,” 332–34.

One can see that with the exception of figure 6, there is little consistency between the various interpretations. One should also note that this is merely the process of identification; it tells us nothing about what the Egyptians of the Greco-Roman period who produced the facsimiles understood by the identifications.

Fletcher's identifications have almost no connection with ancient Egyptian identifications or with Egyptological misidentifications either. As a result, whatever homilies he might construct based on his identifications, however edifying they may be, have no real connection to the facsimiles. The same can be said for his identifications of the figures in the other facsimiles from the Book of Abraham. One would never know, using Fletcher's method, that each of the facsimiles has been connected with Abraham by ancient Egyptians.<sup>10</sup>

### Underlying Assumptions

For me, among the more interesting aspects of works on the Book of Abraham are the various tacit assumptions made by the authors about the Book of Abraham or the facsimiles. These assumptions always color, and in most cases overwhelmingly guide, the work done. Yet these assumptions are rarely made explicit. In many cases they are demonstrably false or at least open to question. In reading Fletcher's book, I identified a number of implicit assumptions that Fletcher has apparently made that are at least open to question. But one overriding assumption undergirding the book brings up an issue that is worth raising.

Earlier in this review I referred to the desire to know the answer to the question: Does the interpretation of Joseph Smith match the

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10. See Janet H. Johnson, "The Demotic Magical Spells of Leiden I 384," *Oudheidkundige mededelingen uit het Rijksmuseum van Oudheden te Leiden* 56 (1975): 33, 48; Janet H. Johnson, "Louvre E3229: A Demotic Magical Text," *Enchoria* 7 (1977): 94, 96; John Gee, "References to Abraham Found in Two Egyptian Texts," *Insights* (September 1991): 1, 3; John Gee, "Abraham in Ancient Egyptian Texts," *Ensign*, July 1992, 60–62; John Gee, "Abracadabra, Isaac and Jacob," *Review of Books on the Book of Mormon* 7/1 (1995): 19–84; John A. Tvedtnes, Brian M. Hauglid, and John Gee, eds., *Traditions about the Early Life of Abraham* (Provo, UT: FARMS, 2001), 501–2, 523; John Gee, "A New Look at the 'nĥ p3 by Formula," in *Proceedings of IX<sup>e</sup> Congrès International des Études Démotiques* (forthcoming).

interpretation of the ancient Egyptians, or does  $X=Y$ ? We know that the interpretations of the Egyptologists typically do not match either those of the ancient Egyptians ( $Z=Y$ ) or Joseph Smith ( $Z=X$ ) and so they are simply irrelevant to the issue. But the unquestioned assumption is that the interpretation of Joseph Smith has to match the interpretation of the ancient Egyptians ( $X=Y$ ). This assumption is related to assumptions and theories (both formal and informal) about the nature of the facsimiles. Several such theories do not require Joseph Smith's interpretation to be the same or even close to that of the ancient Egyptians. For example, ancient Jewish interpretations for various Egyptian scenes are known that differ considerably from the ancient Egyptian interpretations and to which Egyptological methods give us no clue.<sup>11</sup> Before any conclusions can be drawn from any comparisons between the two, one needs to have an answer to the question: why do Joseph Smith's interpretations need to match ancient Egyptian interpretations at all? I do not intend to answer the issue here but merely to raise it. Critics should note that unless they can answer this question satisfactorily, they have no case.

## Conclusions

A book like Fletcher's might be useful to the extent that it is well done. To paraphrase what I have written on the subject elsewhere: If we ignore the ancient Egyptian identifications of the various figures in the facsimiles, we will construct an understanding of the facsimiles that bears no resemblance to the ancient Egyptian understanding. We will, in short, not understand them at all.<sup>12</sup> In the end I found very little in Fletcher's book, at least in his interpretation of the figures according to ancient Egyptians, that I could agree with. One temporary conclusion must be stressed: *To date there has been no methodologically valid interpretation of any of the facsimiles from an ancient Egyptian point of*

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11. Kevin L. Barney, "The Facsimiles and Semitic Adaptation of Existing Sources," in *Astronomy, Papyrus, and Covenant*, ed. John Gee and Brian M. Hauglid (Provo, UT: FARMS, 2005), 107-30.

12. Gee, "Towards an Interpretation of Hypocephali," 330.

*view*.<sup>13</sup> Much more work needs to be done before we can understand the facsimiles in their ancient Egyptian setting, and only then will it be meaningful to ask whether that understanding matches that of Joseph Smith (to the extent that we understand even that).

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13. Gee, "Towards an Interpretation of Hypocephali," 325–34, provides identification only but does not make the further step into interpretation. I have two other articles currently in press that deal with aspects of steps 3 and 4 for Facsimile 2, and part of step 4 for Facsimile 3; see Gee, "A New Look at the 'nh pꜣ by Formula," and John Gee, "Non-round Hypocephali," in *Aegyptus et Pannonia III*, ed. Hedvig Györy (Budapest: MEBOEB, 2006), 41–57.

