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Stephen O. Smoot

John Gee

Kerry Muhlestein

John S. Thompson

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Abraham the Seer

A careful reading of the Book of Abraham reveals subtle literary and narrative elements in the text that might otherwise go unappreciated. For instance, a running leitmotif—a recurring theme or concept—throughout the Book of Abraham is that of Abraham as a seer, or someone who sees or otherwise has a visual interaction with divine manifestation (typically or usually aided by a divinatory device such as a seer stone).¹ As seen in both the mention of Abraham’s possession and use of the Urim and Thummim (Abr. 3:1) as well as the repeated use of verbs such as *see* and *show* (in their various forms), the Book of Abraham captures this imagery in both explicit and subtle ways.

The very first verse of the Book of Abraham launches this leitmotif that is carried throughout the text: “In the land of the Chaldeans, at the residence of my fathers, I, Abraham, *saw* that it was needful for me to obtain another place of residence” (Abr. 1:1, emphasis added). This is emphasized again when the Lord instructs, “Abraham, get thee out of thy country, and from thy kindred, and from thy father’s house, unto a land that I will *show* thee” (Abr. 2:3, emphasis added). Rather than haphazardly deciding to find a new land of promise on a whim, Abraham is depicted instead as having the visionary foresight to relocate.

The third chapter of the Book of Abraham greatly expands on this leitmotif as it narrates Abraham’s vision of the cosmos and the pre-mortal world. As mentioned, the text overtly mentions that Abraham had a seer’s instrument (the Urim and Thummim), which he consulted to communicate with God. “And I, Abraham, had the Urim and

1. In the Latter-day Saint canon, seers are defined as those who use divinely prepared stones to receive communication from God, primarily for the purpose of translating sacred records. See, for example, Mosiah 8:13–17; JS–H 1:34–35.

Thummim, which the Lord my God had given unto me, in Ur of the Chaldees; and I saw the stars, that they were very great, and that one of them was nearest unto the throne of God; and there were many great ones which were near unto it” (Abr. 3:1–2, emphasis added). Verbs of seeing or revelation that trigger the leitmotif are employed throughout the rest of the chapter (and in Abraham’s vision of Creation) following these introductory verses:

“And the Lord said unto me: Now, Abraham, these two facts exist, behold *thine eyes see it*” (Abr. 3:6, emphasis added).

“Thus I, Abraham, talked with the Lord, *face to face*, as one man talketh with another; and he told me of the works which his hands had made; and he said unto me: My son, my son (and his hand was stretched out), behold I will *show* you all these. And he put his hand upon mine *eyes*, and I *saw* those things which his hands had made, which were many; and they *multiplied before mine eyes*, and I could not *see* the end thereof” (Abr. 3:11–12, emphasis added).²

“And the Lord said unto me: Abraham, I *show* these things unto thee before ye go into Egypt, that ye may declare all these words” (Abr. 3:15, emphasis added).

“If two things exist, and there be one above the other, there shall be greater things above them; therefore Kolob is the greatest of all the Kokaubeam that thou hast *seen*, because it is nearest unto me” (Abr. 3:16, emphasis added).

“I rule in the heavens above, and in the earth beneath, in all wisdom and prudence, over all the intelligences *thine eyes have seen* from the beginning; I came down in the beginning in the midst of all the intelligences thou hast *seen*. 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; and he said unto me: Abraham,

2. Intriguingly, in 1893, Charles Lowell Walker preserved the testimony of a certain John Alger, who related that Joseph Smith informed him (Alger) in 1835 that during the First Vision God the Father physically touched Joseph’s eyes, whereupon the Prophet beheld Jesus Christ. A. Karl Larson and Katharine Miles Larson, eds., *Diary of Charles Lowell Walker*, 2 vols. (Logan: Utah State University Press, 1980), 2:755–56. Although the reliability of this account is diminished by it being a late, thirdhand reminiscence, the parallel with the Lord touching Abraham’s eyes at Abraham 3:12 is somewhat remarkable.

thou art one of them; thou wast chosen before thou wast born” (Abr. 3:21–23, emphasis added).

“Now I, Abraham, *saw* that it was after the Lord’s time, which was after the time of Kolob; for as yet the Gods had not appointed unto Adam his reckoning” (Abr. 5:13, emphasis added).

This depiction of the patriarch as a seer is congruent with a similar motif in the book of Genesis. As summarized by Everett Fox, Genesis also utilizes the language of perception and vision (specifically the verb *ra’ah*, “to see”) in the Abrahamic narrative cycle.

At the outset of Abraham’s journey to Canaan, which signals his entry into biblical tradition as an independent personality, God sends him off to a land that he will “let him see” (12:1). Arriving in the land, Abraham is granted a communication from God, expressed by the phrase “YHWH was seen by Avram . . .” (12:7). God subsequently promises the land to him and his descendants (“see from the place that you are . . . for all the land that you see, to you I give it and to your seed, for the ages” [13:15]). “Seeing” comes to the fore in the story of Abraham’s concubine Hagar; her encounter with God’s messenger ends with her addressing a “God of Seeing” (16:13). Further meetings between Abraham and God (17:1, 18:1) likewise express themselves visually, with the latter scene, where God announces Isaac’s impending birth at Abraham’s tent, almost unique in the Bible for its bold picture of God appearing directly to human beings.³

The Jewish philosopher Martin Buber identified seven revelations to Abraham in the Genesis account that lead with the theme of the patriarch seeing or beholding God or otherwise perceiving some crucial information pertaining to God’s covenant:⁴

“Now the Lord had said unto Abram, Get thee out of thy country, and from thy kindred, and from thy father’s house, unto a land that I will *shew* thee” (Gen. 12:1, emphasis added).

“And the Lord *appeared* unto Abram, and said, Unto thy seed will I give this land: and there builded he an altar unto the Lord, who *appeared* unto him” (Gen. 12:7, emphasis added).

“And the Lord said unto Abram, after that Lot was separated from him, *Lift up now thine eyes*, and *look* from the place where thou art

3. Everet Fox, *The Five Books of Moses: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy*, The Schocken Bible 1 (New York: Schocken, 1995), xvii.

4. Martin Buber, “Abraham the Seer (Genesis 12–25),” in *On the Bible: Eighteen Studies*, ed. Nahum N. Glatzer (Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 2000), 22–43, esp. 37–41. Buber’s scripture references contain some errors; they are corrected here.

northward, and southward, and eastward, and westward” (Gen. 13:14, emphasis added).

“After these things the word of the Lord came unto Abram in a *vision*, saying, Fear not, Abram: I am thy shield, and thy exceeding great reward.” (Gen. 15:1, emphasis added).

“And when Abram was ninety years old and nine, the Lord *appeared* to Abram, and said unto him, I am the Almighty God; walk before me, and be thou perfect” (Gen. 17:1, emphasis added).

“And the Lord *appeared* unto him in the plains of Mamre: and he sat in the tent door in the heat of the day” (Gen. 18:1, emphasis added).

“And it came to pass after these things, that God did tempt Abraham, and said unto him, Abraham: and he said, Behold, here I am. And he said, Take now thy son, thine only son Isaac, whom thou lovest, and get thee into the land of Moriah; and offer him there for a burnt offering upon one of the mountains which I will tell thee of. . . . Then on the third day Abraham *lifted up his eyes*, and *saw* the place afar off” (Gen. 22:1–2, 4, emphasis added).

As Buber elaborates, the first six revelations culminate with the seventh—the binding of Isaac in the land of Moriah (Gen. 22:2),⁵ which Abraham renames Jehovah-jireh (Gen. 22:14; “Jehovah will see”; *yhw’h-yirē’eh*). This new name is given to the site after the angel of the Lord calls out Abraham’s name (Gen. 22:11; compare Abr. 1:15–16) and after the latter lifts up his eyes to see the ram caught in a thicket, which acts as a substitute sacrifice (Gen. 22:13).

In the saving moment [Abraham] lifts up his eyes and sees the ram. And now he proclaims over the altar the name that makes known the imperishable essence of this place, Mount Moriah: YHVH Will See. . . . God sees man, and man sees God. God sees Abraham, and tests him by seeing him as the righteous and “whole” man who walks before his God, and now, at the end of his road, he conquers even this final place, the holy temple mountain [compare 2 Chr. 3:1], by acting on God’s behalf. Abraham sees God with the eye of his action and so recognizes Him. . . . The mutual relationship of the one making the demands, who makes them only in order to bless, and of the one making the sacrifice and receiving the highest blessing in the moment of the greatest readiness

5. The name Moriah might derive from *mr’h* (“sight, vision”) or might otherwise be related to the verb *ra’ah*. If so, this would make the name of the location, appropriately, the “land of vision.” E. A. Speiser, *Genesis*, The Anchor Yale Bible (New York: Doubleday, 1964), 163; and R. W. L. Moberly, *The Bible, Theology, and Faith: A Study of Abraham and Jesus* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 111–12.

to sacrifice, here appears as the reciprocity of seeing. God sees the innermost reality of the human soul; and man sees the way of God, so that he may walk in His footsteps. The man sees, and sees also that he is being seen.⁶

It is for this reason that Buber feels it appropriate to afford Abraham the title of seer. “Abraham sees God with the eye of his action and so recognizes Him. . . . Abraham *becomes* a prophet, but a seer is what he was from the very first moment when God ‘let Himself be seen.’”⁷ The running theme of Abraham as a seer adds a level of depth and narrative sophistication to both the Genesis account and the account of Abraham’s stargazing in the Book of Abraham.

Further Reading

Bowen, Matthew L. “‘In the Mount of the Lord It Shall Be Seen’ and ‘Provided’: Theophany and Sacrifice as the Etiological Foundation of the Temple in Israelite and Latter-day Saint Tradition.” *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 5 (2013): 201–23.

6. Buber, “Abraham the Seer (Genesis 12–25),” 42. See also the insightful commentary on this theme from a Latter-day Saint perspective offered in Matthew L. Bowen, “‘In the Mount of the Lord It Shall Be Seen’ and ‘Provided’: Theophany and Sacrifice as the Etiological Foundation of the Temple in Israelite and Latter-day Saint Tradition,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 5 (2013): 201–23, esp. 210–17.

7. Buber, “Abraham the Seer (Genesis 12–25),” 42–43, emphasis in original.

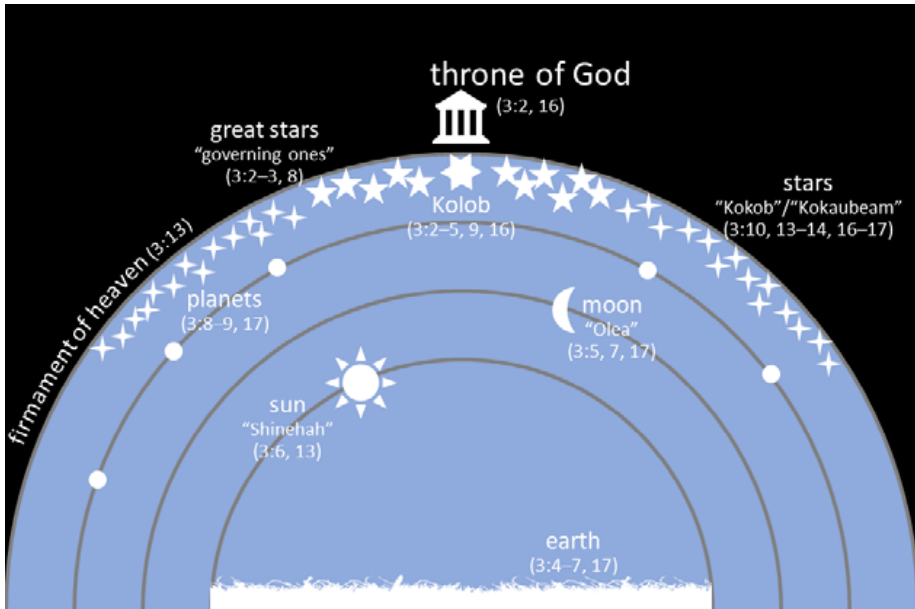


FIGURE 23. The cosmos depicted in the Book of Abraham when read as a geocentric text. Courtesy Michael B. Parker.