



2022

Abrahamic Astronomy

Stephen O. Smoot

John Gee

Kerry Muhlestein

John S. Thompson

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/byusq>



Part of the [Mormon Studies Commons](#), and the [Religious Education Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Smoot, Stephen O.; Gee, John; Muhlestein, Kerry; and Thompson, John S. (2022) "Abrahamic Astronomy," *BYU Studies Quarterly*. Vol. 61: Iss. 4, Article 23.

Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/byusq/vol61/iss4/23>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at BYU ScholarsArchive. It has been accepted for inclusion in *BYU Studies Quarterly* by an authorized editor of BYU ScholarsArchive. For more information, please contact ellen_amatangelo@byu.edu.

Abrahamic Astronomy

The Book of Abraham is noteworthy for its description of what is sometimes called “Abrahamic astronomy.”¹ Chapter 3 of the Book of Abraham, along with Facsimile 2, contains this astronomical portrait, which is not always easy to understand. Scholars looking at the text in chapter 3 have articulated at least three different models for interpreting this feature.

The first model seeks to understand the astronomy in the Book of Abraham through a scientific lens. Those who accept this paradigm have offered arguments for how Abrahamic astronomy can be harmonized with modern science.² The second model works under the assumption that the astronomical concepts presented in the Book of Abraham are rooted in ancient cosmology. In particular, this model sees the Book of

1. For instance, Erich Robert Paul, *Science, Religion, and Mormon Cosmology* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1992), 87, 100, 102–3, 121; Daniel C. Peterson, “News from Antiquity,” *Ensign* 24, no. 1 (January 1994): 19; and Richard Lyman Bushman with Jed Woodworth, *Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2005), 454.

2. Historically, this has proven to be the most popular model. See, for example, Andrew Jenson, “Joseph Smith a True Prophet, III: Astronomy of Abraham,” *Latter-day Saints’ Millennial Star* 53, no. 16 (April 20, 1891): 241–44; and J. E. Hickman, “Astronomy Attests the Truth of the Book of Abraham,” *Improvement Era* 19, no. 7 (May 1916): 591–96. For recent iterations of this model, see Michael D. Rhodes and J. Ward Moody, “Astronomy and Creation in the Book of Abraham,” in *Astronomy, Papyrus, and Covenant*, ed. John Gee and Brian M. Hauglid (Provo, Utah: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 2005), 17–36; and Michael D. Rhodes, “The Scriptural Accounts of the Creation: A Scientific Perspective,” in *Converging Paths to Truth*, ed. Michael D. Rhodes and J. Ward Moody (Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2011), 123–49; compare J. Ward Moody, “Times of Reckoning and Set Times in Abraham 3,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 38 (2020): 1–14.

Abraham as depicting a geocentric (earth-centered) view of the cosmos, which differs from our modern scientific understanding that the sun is at the center of our solar system.³ The third model argues for essentially an inverse of the second model and puts forth a reading of the Book of Abraham's astronomy that places Kolob, not the earth, at the center of the cosmos. This model argues that while the astronomy of the Book of Abraham may be ancient, the main focus should be on the spiritual truths that can be gleaned from the text.⁴

Each of these models has its respective strengths and weaknesses. For the purposes of this treatment (placing the Book of Abraham in the ancient world), the second model that sees the Book of Abraham's astronomy as an ancient geocentric cosmos is worth paying close attention to. According to this model,

the astronomy in the Book of Abraham uses as its point of reference "the earth upon which thou standest" (Abraham 3:3, 5-7). It mentions various heavenly bodies, such as "the stars" (Abraham 3:2), among which is Kolob (Abraham 3:3-4). These provide a fixed backdrop for the heavens. Among the stars are various bodies that move in relation to the fixed backdrop, each of which is called a "planet" (Abraham 3:5, 8) or a "light" (Abraham 3:5-7), though since the sun and moon and certain stars are each also called a "planet," we should not think of them as necessarily being what we call planets. Each of these planets is associated with "its times and seasons in the revolutions thereof" (Abraham 3:4). These lights revolve around something, and that is the fixed reference point, "the earth upon which thou standest" (Abraham 3:3, 5-7). The Book of Abraham thus presents a geocentric astronomy, like almost all ancient astronomies, including ancient Egyptian astronomy.⁵

Importantly, the Lord explicitly told Abraham: "I show these things [the heavenly bodies described in Abraham 3] unto thee before ye go into Egypt, that ye may declare all these words" (Abr. 3:15). Evidently the astronomy revealed to Abraham was meant, in part, to take conceptions of the cosmos familiar to the ancient Egyptians and replace them with a proper gospel understanding. "Abraham was to teach not

3. John Gee, William J. Hamblin, and Daniel C. Peterson, "'And I Saw the Stars': The Book of Abraham and Ancient Geocentric Astronomy," in *Astronomy, Papyrus, and Covenant*, 1-16; compare William E. Dibble, "The Book of Abraham and Pythagorean Astronomy," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 8, nos. 3-4 (Fall 1973): 134-38.

4. Kerry Muhlestein, "Encircling Astronomy and the Egyptians: An Approach to Abraham 3," *Religious Educator* 10, no. 1 (2009): 33-50.

5. Gee, *Introduction to the Book of Abraham*, 115-16.

only astronomy but also gospel principles the Lord explained through astronomic means.”⁶ This could explain why the Book of Abraham contains an apparently prescientific description of the cosmos rooted in the ancient world. This could only be feasibly accomplished if Abraham communicated to the Egyptians and likened the cosmos to gospel truths in ways they understood.

While the Book of Abraham’s astronomy symbolically teaches important truths about the plan of salvation,⁷ and while it is interesting to explore how modern science might inform our understanding, the cosmology in the text can also be grounded in the ancient world.

Further Reading

- Gee, John. “Abrahamic Astronomy.” In *An Introduction to the Book of Abraham*, 115–20. Salt Lake City: Deseret Book; Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 2017.
- Gee, John, William J. Hamblin, and Daniel C. Peterson. “‘And I Saw the Stars’: The Book of Abraham and Ancient Geocentric Astronomy.” In *Astronomy, Papyrus, and Covenant*, edited by John Gee and Brian M. Hauglid, 1–16. Provo, Utah: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 2005.
- Muhlestein, Kerry. “Astronomy.” In *Pearl of Great Price Reference Companion*, edited by Dennis L. Largey, 37–38. Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2017.
- . “Encircling Astronomy and the Egyptians: An Approach to Abraham 3.” *Religious Educator* 10, no. 1 (2009): 33–50.
- Rhodes, Michael D., and J. Ward Moody. “Astronomy and Creation in the Book of Abraham.” In *Astronomy, Papyrus, and Covenant*, edited by John Gee and Brian M. Hauglid, 17–36. Provo, Utah: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 2005.

6. Muhlestein, “Encircling Astronomy and the Egyptians,” 35.

7. Muhlestein, “Encircling Astronomy and the Egyptians,” 43–48.