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Shinehah, the Sun

One of the astronomical terms defined in the Book of Abraham is Shinehah, which is said to be the sun (Abr. 3:13). Earlier in the Book of Abraham, the “god of Shagreel” is identified as the sun as well (Abr. 1:9). The context of these passages suggests that Shagreel is a West Semitic name or word while Shinehah is an Egyptian name or word, although this is not explicit in the text.¹ We do not know how Joseph Smith intended the word Shinehah to be pronounced; whether, for instance, *shine-hah* or *shi-ney-hah* or some other way.² However it is pronounced, contrary to the claim made by some of Joseph Smith’s critics,³ there is evidence that Shinehah is an authentic ancient Egyptian word.

1. The identity of this god is not certain, but there are a number of possibilities. See the explorations in Hugh Nibley, *An Approach to the Book of Abraham*, ed. John Gee, The Collected Works of Hugh Nibley 18 (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book; Provo, Utah: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 2009), 416–17; Hugh Nibley and Michael D. Rhodes, *One Eternal Round*, The Collected Works of Hugh Nibley 19 (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book; Provo, Utah: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, 2010), 173–75; Robert F. Smith, “A Brief Assessment of the LDS Book of Abraham,” unpublished manuscript in authors’ possession, 12; and Richard D. Draper, S. Kent Brown, and Michael D. Rhodes, *The Pearl of Great Price: A Verse-by-Verse Commentary* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2005), 251. But see also Matthew Grey, “Approaching Egyptian Papyri through Biblical Language: Joseph Smith’s Use of Hebrew in His Translation of the Book of Abraham,” in *Producing Ancient Scripture: Joseph Smith’s Translation Projects in the Development of Mormon Christianity*, ed. Michael Hubbard MacKay, Mark Ashurst-McGee, and Brian M. Hauglid (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2020), 429, who believes Shinehah and its companion word Olea (defined as “the moon” at Abr. 3:13) derive from Joseph Smith’s work attempting to recover the “pure language” of Adam.

2. The current official edition of the Pearl of Great Price published by The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints does not provide a standardized pronunciation for Shinehah or the other astronomical terms in the Book of Abraham.

3. Samuel A. B. Mercer, “Joseph Smith as an Interpreter and Translator of Egyptian,” *Utah Survey* 1, no. 1 (September 1913): 33–34.

Beginning around 2350 BC, “the walls of the inner chambers and corridors of ancient Egyptian pyramids were inscribed with a series of ritual and magical spells” known today as the Pyramid Texts. “These inscriptions constitute the oldest body of Egyptian religious writings” and were later copied “on tombs, sarcophagi, coffins, canopic chests, papyri, stelae, and other funerary monuments of nonroyal Egyptians.”⁴ Discovered in 1880 and translated into English for the first time in 1952,⁵ the Pyramid Texts were intended to outline the “deceased’s relationship to two gods, Osiris and the Sun,” and guide him or her through the afterlife as a glorified spirit.⁶

Among other things, the Pyramid Texts provided astronomical or cosmological information meant to help guide the deceased on this afterlife journey.⁷ “Since it was predicated on the Sun’s daily cycle of death and rebirth, the deceased’s own afterlife was envisioned as a journey in company with the Sun.”⁸ The path of the sun through the sky from east to west, known as the ecliptic, was envisioned in the Pyramid Texts as a celestial canal or waterway that bisected the sky into northern and southern hemispheres.⁹ Indeed, this canal or waterway was probably seen as “the celestial counterpart of the Nile.”¹⁰ Inscriptions from the Pyramid Texts overtly speak of the sun (or the solar barque) traveling along this celestial waterway.¹¹

There are two names given for this celestial canal or waterway (the sun’s ecliptic) in the Pyramid Texts. The more common spelling is *mr-n-h3* and is translated by Egyptologist James Allen as “Winding Canal.”¹² A less common but still attested second name for this same “Winding Canal” in the Pyramid Texts is spelled in a way that by Abraham’s time

4. James P. Allen, trans., *The Ancient Egyptian Pyramid Texts*, ed. Peter Der Manuelian (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2005), 1.

5. Allen, *Ancient Egyptian Pyramid Texts*, 2.

6. Allen, *Ancient Egyptian Pyramid Texts*, 7–8.

7. Rolf Krauss, *Astronomische Konzepte und Jenseitsvorstellungen in den Pyramidentexten* (Wiesbaden, Ger.: Harrassowitz Verlag, 1997).

8. Allen, *Ancient Egyptian Pyramid Texts*, 8–9.

9. Krauss, *Astronomische Konzepte und Jenseitsvorstellungen*, 14–66; Allen, *Ancient Egyptian Pyramid Texts*, 9; John Gee, “Hypocephali as Astronomical Documents,” in *Aegyptus et Pannonia V: Acta Symposii anno 2008*, ed. Hedvig Györy and Ádám Szabó (Budapest: Ancient Egyptian Committee of the Hungarian-Egyptian Friendship Society, 2016), 60.

10. Robert G. Bauval, “A Master-Plan for the Three Pyramids of Giza Based on the Configuration of the Three Stars of the Belt of Orion,” *Discussions in Egyptology* 13 (1989): 10.

11. Pyramid Text (PT) 334 (§543a–b); PT 548 (§§1345c; 1346a–c).

12. Allen, *Ancient Egyptian Pyramid Texts*, esp. 444. PT 263 (§340d); PT 264 (§343a); PT 265 (§352a); PT 266 (§359b); PT 304 (§469a); PT 334 (§543b); PT 359 (§§ 594b–f; 596b; 599a–d; 600a–b); PT 504 (§1084b); PT 507 (§1102d); PT 522 (§1228b–c).

may have been pronounced similar to *shi-ne-hah* (\check{s} -*n-h3* or \check{s} *nh3*).¹³ Although they alternate in the Pyramid Texts, the different spellings of the name would have likely been seen as being synonymous,¹⁴ and so Egyptologists today typically standardize the spelling to read all attestations of the name the more common way (*mr-n-h3*).¹⁵ Despite this, the name survived into Abraham's day in texts known today as the Coffin Texts (which were, in part, something of a direct descendant of the Pyramid Texts) predominantly as \check{s} -*n-h3* (or \check{s} *nh3*).¹⁶

13. PT 437 (§802a), PT 512 (§1162c), PT 555 (§§1376c; 1377c), PT 569 (§1441a), PT 624 (§1759b), PT 697 (§2172c), PT 767 (§20). There is some question about the original pronunciation of the first consonant in the name *s-n-h3*. The hieroglyph used to represent the sound *sh* (\check{s}) (compare Rainer Hannig, *Ägyptisches Wörterbuch I: Altes Reich und Erste Zwischenzeit* [Mainz, Ger.: Verlag Philipp von Zabern, 2003], 1278–79) was also used in Old Egyptian (the form of the Egyptian language the Pyramid Texts were written in) to represent the sound *x* (*h*). Questions remain as to whether the glyph was originally pronounced *sh* (\check{s}) or *x* (*h*). See the discussion in Antonio Loprieno, *Ancient Egyptian: A Linguistic Introduction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 34; James P. Allen, *The Ancient Egyptian Language: An Historical Study* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 44–45; James P. Allen, *A Grammar of the Ancient Egyptian Pyramid Texts, Volume 1: Unis* (Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 2017), 25–26; and James P. Allen, *Ancient Egyptian Phonology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 68–69. By Abraham's day, the glyph was being pronounced uniformly as *sh* (\check{s}), so while the original pronunciation of this spelling of the name remains debated, the way the word is rendered in the Book of Abraham with *sh* is entirely justifiable. Unfortunately, because the vocalization of ancient Egyptian is still largely educated guesswork, especially when it comes to the vowels, at this point we can only give approximations about how *s-n-h3* would have been pronounced in Abraham's day. What matters most for Shinehah in the Book of Abraham is that the consonants match \check{s} -*n-h3*/ \check{s} *nh3* rather nicely. On Middle Egyptian vocalization, see James P. Allen, *Middle Egyptian: An Introduction to the Language and Culture of Hieroglyphs*, 3rd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 18–21; and Allen, *Ancient Egyptian Phonology*.

14. This might explain the odd spelling *mr-{\check{s}}-n-h3* in PT 510 (§1138d).

15. Krauss, *Astronomische Konzepte und Jenseitsvorstellungen*, 15; James P. Allen, *A New Concordance of the Pyramid Texts, Vol. 1: Introduction, Occurrences, Transcription* (Providence, R.I.: Brown University Press, 2013); see also *mr nh3i* in Allen, *Ancient Egyptian Pyramid Texts*, 444.

16. Rendered “Winding Waterway” by Raymond O. Faulkner, *The Ancient Egyptian Coffin Texts*, 3 vols. (Warminster: Aris and Phillips, 1973–1978). Coffin Text (CT) 18 (I 53); CT 61 (I 259); CT 62 (I 270); CT 163 (II 405); CT 214 (III 174); CT 241 (III 326); CT 268 (IV 1); CT 285 (IV 35); CT 347 (IV 380); CT 393 (V 67); CT 418 (V 253); CT 473 (VI 15); CT 474 (VI 26); CT 479 (VI 42); CT 582 (VI 199); CT 905 (VII 111); CT 987 (VII 194); CT 1129 (VII 458). Attested as *mr-n-h3* in CT 305 (IV 59). Compare Rami van der Molen, *A Hieroglyphic Dictionary of Egyptian Coffin Texts* (Leiden, Neth.: Brill, 2000), 599, who transliterates the glyphs as \check{s} *nh3* and renders the name as “Waterway of the Winding.” The first attempt to compile and publish the Coffin Texts was undertaken by the French scholar Pierre Lacau beginning in 1904. Adriaan de Buck published the first complete

From this evidence it is clear that both *š-n-ḥz* and *mr-n-ḥz* are attested as names for the sun's ecliptic. The latter is more common in the Old Kingdom (ca. 2686–2181 BC) but the former is more common in the Middle Kingdom (ca. 2040–1782 BC) and thus in Abraham's day.¹⁷ The spelling of the name as attested in the Coffin Texts from Abraham's day matches the spelling of Shinehah in the Book of Abraham fairly closely. What's more, the context in the Book of Abraham is significant since Shinehah (the sun) is oriented in a tiered cosmos of graded celestial bodies (the moon, stars, and so forth) rotating around the earth at faster or slower revolutions depending on their relative distance to the earth (Abr. 3:4–9, 16–17).¹⁸

So while the Egyptian word for the sun itself is not the same as in the Book of Abraham,¹⁹ one of the Egyptian words for the sun's ecliptic (the path of the sun through the sky) as attested in Abraham's day is.²⁰

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.

Nibley, Hugh, and Michael D. Rhodes. *One Eternal Round*, 333–35. The Collected Works of Hugh Nibley 19. Salt Lake City: Deseret Book; Provo, Utah: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, 2010.

collection of these texts between 1935 and 1961. The first accessible English translation of the complete (or near-complete) corpus of Coffin Texts were the volumes published by Raymond Faulkner as cited above.

17. See further John Gee, "Fantasy and Reality in the Translation of the Book of Abraham," *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 42 (2021): 156–58.

18. 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*, ed. John Gee and Brian M. Hauglid (Provo, Utah: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 2005), esp. 7–8, 12.

19. The word for the sun itself in ancient Egyptian is *rꜥ*, the same word for the name of the sun-god Re.

20. See further Nibley and Rhodes, *One Eternal Round*, 333–35, who propose an etymology for Shinehah deriving from the Egyptian words *šni* ("to encircle") and *nḥḥ* ("eternity," "many," "millions," and so forth) and thus reconstruct the word as **šn+ḥḥ* (effectively, "one eternal round"). While this might be plausible etymologically, the main drawback to this proposed origin for the word Shinehah is that it is hypothetical and reconstructed, whereas *š-n-ḥz/š nḥz* is attested. Nibley and Rhodes also rightly pick up on the cosmological significance of the sun's "motion relative to that of other heavenly bodies" in Abraham 3:13.