BYU Studies Quarterly

Volume 61 | Issue 4 Article 25

2022

Kolob, the Governing One

Stephen O. Smoot

John Gee

Kerry Muhlestein

John S. Thompson

Kolob, the Governing One

One of the more memorable contributions of the Book of Abraham is its depiction of Kolob (Abr. 3:3–4, 9, 16; Facsimile 2, fig. 1). According to the Book of Abraham, Kolob is characterized by the following:

- It is a star or planet (Abr. 3:1–2, 8–9).[1]
- It is a "great [star]" and one of the "governing ones" (Abr. 3:3).

1. The Book of Abraham tends to conflate "star" with "planet," leading some Latter-day Saints to speak of Kolob as a planet or world. Compare, for instance, William Appleby, Journal, 5 May 1841, MS 1401, Church History Library; Brigham Young, "Territory of Utah: Proclamation, for a Day of Praise and Thanksgiving," in *Journals of the House of Representatives, Council, and Joint Sessions of the First Annual and Special Sessions of the Legislative Assembly of the Territory of Utah* (Salt Lake City: Brigham Young, 1852), 166; John Taylor, "Origins, Object, and Destiny of Woman," *Mormon* 3, no. 28 (August 29, 1857): [2]; Orson Pratt, "Millennium," *Latter-day Saints' Millennial Star* 28, no. 36 (September 8, 1866): 561; Ann Fellows, "Religion and Science," *Woman's Exponent* 12, no. 7 (September 1, 1883): 49; Orson F. Whitney, "Sunday Services," *Deseret Evening News,* August 20, 1888, [2]; Andrew Jenson, Discourse, January 16, 1891, in "Joseph Smith a True Prophet," *Deseret Evening News,* March 4, 1891, [5], repr. "Joseph Smith a True Prophet," *Latter-day Saints' Millennial Star* 53, no. 16 (April 20, 1891): 241; George Q. Cannon, "Discourse," *Deseret Evening News,* May 4, 1895, 9; B. H. Roberts, *A New Witness for God* (Salt Lake City: George Q. Cannon and Sons, 1895), 447; Bruce R. McConkie, *Mormon Doctrine* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1958), 390; J. Reuben Clark Jr., *Behold the Lamb of God* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1962), 30; Spencer W. Kimball, in *One Hundred Thirty-second Annual Conference of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1962), 60–61; Joseph Fielding Smith, in *One Hundred Thirty-sixth Semi-annual General Conference of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1966), 83; and Bruce L. Christensen, "Media Myths and Miracles," BYU Devotional, Provo, Utah, November 8, 1994, https://speeches.byu.edu/talks/bruce-l-christensen/media-myths-miracles/. While confusing for modern readers, this conflation makes sense from an ancient perspective, because astronomical texts from the ancient Near East did not neatly distinguish the two categories as is done in

- It is "near unto [God]" or "nigh unto the throne of God" (Abr. 3:2–3, 9–10).
- It was used to tell relative time ("one revolution [of Kolob] was a day unto the Lord, after his manner of reckoning, it being one thousand years according to the time appointed unto that whereon thou [Abraham] standest" [Abr. 3:4]).
- It "signify[ed] the first creation, nearest to the celestial, or the residence of God. First in government, the last pertaining to the measurement of time. The measurement according to celestial time, which celestial time signifies one day to a cubit" (Facsimile 2, fig. 1).

Latter-day Saints have long been interested in Kolob for its doctrinal and cosmological significance.[2] The opening words to the beloved hymn "If You Could Hie to Kolob," written by William W. Phelps, were of course inspired by Kolob in the Book of Abraham.[3]

In recent years, spurred on by promising discoveries, some Latter-day Saint scholars have sought to situate Kolob in the ancient world.

---

modern scientific cosmology. "The nouns [in ancient Mesopotamian languages] commonly translated as 'star' in English . . . refer to a full range of observed astronomical phenomena, including the fixed stars but also constellations, planets, mirages, comets, shooting stars, etc." Wayne Horowitz, "Mesopotamian Star Lists," in *Handbook of Archaeoastronomy and Ethnoastronomy,* ed. Clive L. N. Ruggles (New York: Springer, 2015), 1830; compare 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), 11.

2. Roberts, *New Witness for God,* 446–48; George Reynolds and Janne M. Sjodahl, *Commentary on the Pearl of Great Price* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News Press, 1965), 308–12; Andrew Skinner, "The Book of Abraham: A Most Remarkable Book," *Ensign* 27, no. 3 (March 1997): 20–21; Joseph Fielding McConkie and Craig J. Ostler, *Revelations of the Restoration: A Commentary on the Doctrine and Covenants and Other Modern Revelations* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2000), 1000–1001; *The Pearl of Great Price Student Manual* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2017), 71–73, 78, 81.

3. "If You Could Hie to Kolob," in *Hymns of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1985), no. 284, first published in 1856 under the title "There Is No End," *Deseret News,* November 19, 1856, 2. Although perhaps the best known, "If You Could Hie To Kolob" is not the only work of Latter-day Saint poetry that has taken at least part of its inspiration from this concept found in the Book of Abraham. See also, for example, W. W. Phelps, *Deseret Almanac, for the Year of Our Lord, 1852* (Salt Lake City: W. Richards, 1852), 8, 10; J. McF., "Gazing at the Comet," *Ogden Junction,* July 11, 1874, [3]; "Hymn 203," in Joel H. Johnson, *Hymns of Praise for the Young: Selected from the Songs of Joel* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News, 1882), 192–93; and Orson F. Whitney, *Elias: An Epic for the Ages* (New York: Knickerbocker Press, 1904), 30, 104, 120.

Although there are still many uncertainties, a few points in favor of the name and concept of Kolob being authentically ancient can be affirmed with reasonable certainty.

First is the matter of the etymology of the name Kolob. One of the more common proposals is that the name derives from the Semitic root *qlb,*[4] meaning "heart, center, middle," and so forth, and is thus related to the Semitic root *qrb,* meaning "to be near, close."[5] This explanation is enticing because throughout the third chapter of the Book of Abraham, Kolob is conceptually linked with the idea of being near God and his celestial residence (vv. 2–3, 9–10, 16). It thus works well as a pun on the name within the Book of Abraham itself:

- "the name of the great one is *Kolob,* because it is *near* unto me [that is the Lord]" (v. 3, emphasis added).
- "until thou come *nigh* unto *Kolob,* which Kolob is after the reckoning of the Lord's time; which *Kolob* is set *nigh* unto the throne of God, to govern all those planets which belong to the same order as that upon which thou standest" (v. 9, emphasis added).
- "therefore *Kolob* is the greatest of all the Kokaubeam [stars] that thou hast seen, because it is *nearest* unto me" (v. 16, emphasis added).

The drawback to this theory, however, is that *qlb* as a Semitic word for "heart, center" is only attested in Semitic languages as far back as Arabic (*qalb*; "heart, core"), which emerged considerably later than Abraham's

4. Janne M. Sjodahl, "The Book of Abraham," *Improvement Era* 16, no. 4 (February 1913): 329; Janne M. Sjodahl, "The Word 'Kolob,'" *Improvement Era* 16, no. 6 (April 1913): 621; Sidney B. Sperry, *Ancient Records Testify in Papyrus and Stone* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1938), 86; Robert F. Smith, "Some 'Neologisms' from the Mormon Canon," in *Conference on the Language of the Mormons* (Provo, Utah: Language Research Center, Brigham Young University, 1973), 64; Michael D. Rhodes, "The Joseph Smith Hypocephalus . . . Twenty Years Later," 8, unpublished manuscript, [1997], accessed December 20, 2022, https://www.magicgatebg.com/Books/Joseph%20Smith%20Hypocephalus.pdf; Michael D. Rhodes, "Teaching the Book of Abraham Facsimiles," *Religious Educator* 4, no. 2 (2003): 121; 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), 289–90; 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), 250–51.

5. *The Assyrian Dictionary of the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago,* ed. John A. Brinkman and others (Chicago: Oriental Institute, 1982), s.v. *qerbu*; Jeremy Black, Andrew George, Nicholas Postgate, eds., *A Concise Dictionary of Akkadian* (Wiesbaden, Ger.: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2000), 288.

time.[6] However, some scholars believe that the Semitic *qrb* (and Arabic *qalb*) are ultimately derived from the reconstructed Afroasiatic root **ḳlb/ḳrb,*[7] which has attested cognate descendants in Egyptian (*ḳꜣb*; "interior, midst"), Akkadian (*qerbum*; "inside"), and Hebrew (*qereb*; "inside, middle").[8] The Egyptian example (*ḳꜣb*)[9] is especially interesting, because there is evidence that the Egyptian aleph /ꜣ/ in Abraham's day was used to render the liquid consonants /r/ and /l/ in Semitic languages.[10] This strengthens the etymology for Kolob proposed above and the likelihood of genuine Semitic-Egyptian paronomasia in the text of the Book of Abraham.

Another promising proposal is that Kolob derives from the Semitic root *klb,* meaning "dog."[11] This theory has been circulating since at least the early twentieth century, when a non–Latter-day Saint named James E. Homans (writing under the pseudonym Robert C. Webb) postulated this idea in 1913.[12] This, in turn, has prompted some to identify

---

6. The closest attested word in Abraham's day to the Arabic *qalb* would probably be the Old Akkadian *qabla* or *qablu* (*qablītu*), meaning "in the middle" or "middle part." *Assyrian Dictionary of the Oriental Institute,* s.v. *qabla, qablītu*; Black, George, and Postgate, *Concise Dictionary of Akkadian,* 281.

7. Antonio Loprieno, *Ancient Egyptian: A Linguistic Introduction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 32.

8. James P. Allen, *The Ancient Egyptian Language: A Historical Study* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 35; James P. Allen, *Ancient Egyptian Phonology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 62, 79.

9. Adolf Erman and Hermann Grapow, *Wörterbuch der Aegyptischen Sprache,* 6 vols. (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1958), 5:10–11; Rainer Hannig, *Großes Handwörterbuch Ägyptisch-Deutsch* (Mainz, Ger.: Philipp von Zabern Verlag, 1995), 849.

10. Aaron Ember, *Egypto-Semitic-Studies* (Leipzig, Ger.: Asia Major Verlag, 1930), 9–23; Allen, *Ancient Egyptian Phonology,* 53, 64, 67–68, 79–82; Allen, *Ancient Egyptian Language,* 35; compare Loprieno, *Ancient Egyptian,* 31, 38; Lanny Bell, "Interpreters and Egyptianized Nubians in Ancient Egyptian Foreign Policy: Aspects of the History of Egypt and Nubia" (PhD diss., University of Pennsylvania, 1976), 13–14; Vladimir Orel, "From Hamito-Semitic to Ancient Egyptian: Historical Phonology," *Folia Linguistica Historica* 16, nos. 1–2 (1995): 147–48; Gábor Takács, "Semitic-Egyptian Relations," in *The Semitic Languages: An International Handbook,* ed. Stefan Weninger (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2011), 8. For an attested example of the Egyptian aleph being used to render the Semitic /l/ during Abraham's day (in a proper name, no less), see James P. Allen, "The Historical Inscription of Khnumhotep at Dahshur: Preliminary Report," *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research* 352 (November 2008): 29–39; and James P. Allen, "L'inscription historique de Khnoumhotep à Dahchour," *Bulletin de la Société Française d'Égyptologie* 173 (2009): 13–31.

11. *Assyrian Dictionary of the Oriental Institute,* s.v. *kalbu*; Black, George, and Postgate, *Concise Dictionary of Akkadian,* 142.

12. Robert C. Webb [James E. Homans], "A Critical Examination of the Fac-similies in the Book of Abraham," *Improvement Era* 16, no. 5 (March 1913): 445; compare Robert C. Webb, *Joseph Smith as a Translator* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News Press, 1936), 102–3.

Kolob with Sirius, the dog-star.[13] This theory actually goes back as far as the mid-nineteenth century, when William W. Phelps captured the idea in an 1857 poem.[14] Known as Sopdet in ancient Egypt (or Sothis in Greek), Sirius held both mythological and calendrical significance to the ancient Egyptians. Usually associated with the goddesses Isis and Hathor, the star Sirius "had a special role because its heliacal rising coincided with the ideal Egyptian New Year day that was linked with the onset of the Nile inundation."[15] Both Sirius and Kolob share a number of overlapping characteristics, including the following:

- Both are associated with the throne of God.[16]
- Both are recognized as the "greatest" (probably meaning brightest) of stars in earth's night sky.[17]

---

13. Webb, "Critical Examination of the Fac-similies," 445; Webb, *Joseph Smith as a Translator,* 103; Nibley and Rhodes, *One Eternal Round,* 251–52.

14. W. W. Phelps, "Here We Are," *Deseret News,* January 28, 1857, 373; compare "Inside View of Mormonism," *Weekly Herald* (New York), May 2, 1857, 139; and "Mormonism," *Cheshire Republican,* May 13, 1857, [1]. The relevant portion of the poem—described by the latter two sources as "a poetical, astronomical plea for polygamy"—reads: "Shine you with the stars to-night— / Where the 'Dog-stars' ever eye us, / As the upper sons of light? / What if Kolob is *Si-ri us?* / God, who's Adam, with a madam. / *Brought our garden seeds from there,*— / Nightly singing—'Here we are.'"

15. Joachim Frederich Quack, "Astronomy in Ancient Egypt," in *The Oxford Handbook of Science and Medicine in the Classical World,* ed. Paul T. Keyser and John Scarborough (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 62. See also Raymond O. Faulkner, "The King and the Star-Religion in the Pyramid Texts," *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 25, no. 3 (July 1966): 157–61; Richard H. Wilkinson, *The Complete Gods and Goddesses of Ancient Egypt* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 2003), 167–68; and Jay B. Holberg, *Sirius: Brightest Diamond in the Night Sky* (Berlin: Springer, 2007), 3–14.

16. One of the ancient Egyptian epithets for Sopdet/Sirius was *wꜥbt swt* or "pure of thrones" in Pyramid Text 442 (§822a) and Pyramid Text 504 (§1082d). The image of the Throne of God in the heavens is commonplace in the Bible (for example, Ps. 11:4; 103:19; Matt. 5:34; 23:22; and Rev. 4:1–2, 5–6).

17. "[Seirios] originally was employed to indicate any bright and sparkling heavenly object, but in the course of time became a proper name for this brightest of all the stars." Richard Hinckley Allen, *Star-Names and Their Meanings* (New York: G. E. Stechert, 1899), 120. "Greek writers made special reference to Sirius, the brilliant star in the constellation [Canis Major]. The name has been derived from *Seirios,* 'sparkling.' This term was at first employed to indicate any bright sparkling object in the sky, and was also applied to the Sun. But after a time, the name was given to the brightest of all stars." Charles Whyte, *The Constellations and Their History* (London: Charles Griffin, 1928), 231–32. "[Sirius] is the brightest of the fixed stars . . . [and] has been throughout human history the most brilliant of the permanent fixed stars." Robert Burnham Jr., *Burnham's Celestial Handbook: An Observer's Guide to the Universe beyond the Solar System* (New York: Dover Publications, 1978), 1:387, 390. "Among the brightest stars of the northern

- Both are depicted as governing other stars.[18]
- Both are associated with creation.[19]
- Both are significant in measuring time.

While these convergences are compelling, the identification of Kolob as Sirius faces some difficulties. For starters, most of Sirius's features just reviewed are attested in Egyptian sources from the Greco-Roman Period, long after Abraham's day (although it may be significant that this is the time period of the Joseph Smith Papyri). The Egyptian word for "dog" (*ỉw*) is also quite different from the Semitic word for the same.[20] Furthermore, Ancient Mesopotamian astronomical texts do speak of a star or constellation called *Kalbu* (Dog),[21] but it is unclear if this *Kalbu* was identified anciently with the constellation Canis Major (which contains Sirius) or another, such as Hercules.[22] By the Greco-Roman period,

---

winter sky, Sirius is prominent as the principal star of the constellation Canis Major, Latin for the Greater Dog." Holberg, *Sirius,* 15.

18. As "the star which fixes and governs the periodic return of the year" (James Bonwick, *Egyptian Belief and Modern Thought* [London: C. Kegan Paul, 1878], 113) and the annual inundation of the Nile, Sirius (specifically its godly manifestation as Hathor/Isis) bore the epithets "Lady of the beginning of the year, Sothis, Mistress of the stars" (*nbt tp rnpt spdt ḥnwt ḫɜbɜ=s*), and "Sothis in the sky, the Female Ruler of the stars" (*spdt m pt ḥḳɜt n*[*t*] *ḫɜbɜ=s*). Barbara A. Richter, *The Theology of Hathor of Dendera: Aural and Visual Scribal Techniques in the Per-Wer Sanctuary* (Atlanta: Lockwood Press, 2016), 4 n. 8, 96.

19. Richter, *Theology of Hathor of Dendera,* 4 n. 8, 96–97, 173, 185; Holberg, *Sirius,* 14. One late Egyptian text describes Sirius as "[the one] who created those who created us" (*r-ỉr ḳm nɜ ỉỉr ḳm=n*), making the star the supreme creator, as it were. "She is Sirius and all things were created through her" (*spt tɜy mtw·w ỉr mdt nb r-ḥr=s*). Wilhelm Spiegelberg, *Der Ägyptische Mythus vom Sonnenauge* (Strassburg, Ger.: Georg Olms Verlag, 1917), 28–29.

20. Erman and Grapow, *Wörterbuch der Aegyptischen Sprache,* 1:48.

21. Hermann Hunger and John Steele, *The Babylonian Astronomical Compendium MUL.APIN* (New York: Routledge, 2019), 35, 49, 55, 62, 69; Hayim Ben Yosef Tawil, *An Akkadian Lexical Companion for Biblical Hebrew: Etymological-Semantic and Idiomatic Equivalents with Supplement on Biblical Aramaic* (Brooklyn, N.Y.: Ktav Publishing House, 2009), 164.

22. Older scholarship identified *Kalbu* with Sirius (for example, Allen, *Star-Names and Their Meanings,* 123; and George A. Barton, "The Babylonian Calendar in the Reigns of Lugalanda and Urkagina," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 31, no. 3 [1911]: 266–67), whereas more recent scholarship identifies it with Hercules (for example, *Assyrian Dictionary of the Oriental Institute,* s.v. *kalbu*; Douglas B. Miller and R. Mark Shipp, *An Akkadian Handbook: Paradigms, Helps, Glossary, Logograms, and Sign List* [Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 1996], 55; and Black, George, Postgate, *A Concise Dictionary of Akkadian*, 142). Hunger and Steele, *Babylonian Astronomical Compendium MUL.APIN,* leave the identification of *Kalbu* unspecified. In Syriac, *kelb* does refer to Sirius, as it does in Arabic (*al-kalb al-akbar,* "the great dog"), although both languages postdate Abraham

there is evidence that Sirius (Isis-Sothis) was "represented as a large dog,"[23] and it is possible that this representation predates Abraham's day, although this point is disputed among Egyptologists.[24] Additionally, scholars who study ancient astronomical texts emphasize that "the identifications between the ancient names and modern names [for stars and constellations] are only approximate and are meant to serve as an aid to the modern reader, rather than to imply exact equivalence between ancient and modern constellations."[25] With this amount of lingering uncertainty, the identification of Kolob with Sirius should therefore be accepted cautiously.

Conceptually, the way Kolob is depicted in the Book of Abraham indicates some awareness (and attempted subversion) of ancient Egyptian cosmology.

> The ancient Egyptians associated the idea of encircling something (whether in the sky or on earth) with controlling or governing it, and the same terms are used for both. Thus, the Book of Abraham notes that "there shall be the reckoning of the time of one planet above another, until thou come nigh unto Kolob, . . . which Kolob is set nigh unto the throne of God, to *govern* all those planets which belong to the same order as that upon which thou standest" (Abraham 3:9; emphasis added). The Egyptians had a similar notion, in which the sun (*Re*) was not only a god but the head of all the gods and ruled over everything that he encircled. Abraham's astronomy sets the sun, "that which is to rule the day" (Abraham 3:5), as greater than the moon but less than Kolob, which governs the sun (Abraham 3:9). Thus, in the astronomy of the Book of Abraham, Kolob, which is the nearest star to God (Abraham 3:16; see also [3:]3, 9), revolves around and thus encircles or controls the sun, which is the head of the Egyptian pantheon.[26]

---

considerably, and so it is uncertain if this identification extends as far back as the Middle Bronze Age. R. Payne Smith, *A Compendious Syriac Dictionary* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1903), 215; Yossef Rapoport and Emilie Savage-Smith, eds. and trans., *An Eleventh-Century Egyptian Guide to the Universe: The Book of Curiosities* (Leiden, Neth.: Brill, 2014), 353, 586.

23. Wilkinson, *Complete Gods and Goddesses of Ancient Egypt,* 168; Marjorie Susan Venit, *Visualizing the Afterlife in the Tombs of Graeco-Roman Egypt* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 183–84, 186, 192–93; and Catlín E. Barrett, *Egyptianizing Figurines from Delos: A Study in Hellenistic Religion* (Leiden, Neth.: Brill, 2011), 187–89.

24. Barrett, *Egyptianizing Figurines from Delos,* 187; Laszlo Kakosy, "Sothis," in *Lexikon der Agyptologie,* ed. Wolfgang Helck and Eberhard Otto (Wiesbaden, Ger.: Harrosowitz Verlag, 1984), 5:1115.

25. Horowitz, "Mesopotamian Star Lists," 1830.

26. John Gee, *An Introduction to the Book of Abraham* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book; Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 2017), 116–17;

While questions about the identification of Kolob still remain, there are some very tantalizing pieces of evidence that, when brought together, reinforce the overall plausible antiquity of this astronomical concept unique to the Book of Abraham.

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.

Nibley, Hugh, and Michael D. Rhodes. *One Eternal Round,* 250–60. 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.

---

compare Kerry Muhlestein, "Encircling Astronomy and the Egyptians: An Approach to Abraham 3," *Religious Educator* 10, no. 1 (2009): 37–43.