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Abrahamic Legends and Lore

As a central figure in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, there are many extrabiblical traditions about the life of the patriarch Abraham. These sources are important to study because they may contain distant memories of real events in Abraham's life. It is also interesting to compare the Book of Abraham with these sources because the Book of Abraham might help us understand these extrabiblical sources better and vice versa.

Much of the Book of Abraham's content that does not appear in the Genesis account parallels the extrabiblical material from these religious traditions.¹ Just some of the unique elements in the Book of Abraham that are found in ancient and medieval Jewish, Christian, and Islamic sources include idolatry in Abraham's day, a famine in the land of the

1. Hugh Nibley provided pioneering work on this subject. See Hugh Nibley, *Abraham in Egypt*, 2nd ed., ed. Gary P. Gillum, *The Collected Works of Hugh Nibley* 14 (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book; Provo, Utah: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies at Brigham University, 2000), 11–42; and 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, Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, 2010), 375–468. More recently, John A. Tvedtnes, Brian M. Hauglid, and John Gee have collected and synthesized a large (though not exhaustive) number of these sources. See John A. Tvedtnes, Brian M. Hauglid, and John Gee, eds., *Traditions about the Early Life of Abraham* (Provo, Utah: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 2001). See also Bradley J. Cook, "The Book of Abraham and the Islamic *Qīṣaṣ al-Anbiyā'* (Tales of the Prophets) Extant Literature," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 33, no. 4 (Winter 2000): 127–46; Brian M. Hauglid, "On the Early Life of Abraham: Biblical and Qur'anic Intertextuality and the Anticipation of Muhammad," in *Bible and Qur'an: Essays in Scriptural Intertextuality*, ed. John C. Reeves (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2003), 87–105; and Brian M. Hauglid, "The Book of Abraham and Muslim Tradition," in *Astronomy, Papyrus, and Covenant*, comp. and ed. John Gee and Brian M. Hauglid, *Studies in the Book of Abraham* 3 (Provo, Utah: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 2005), 131–46.

Chaldeans, an attempt to sacrifice Abraham, Abraham receiving a vision of God and the cosmos, and Abraham being knowledgeable about astronomy and teaching such to the Egyptians.²

For example, an early Christian author named Eusebius preserved an account of Abraham teaching the Egyptians astronomy: “Abraham lived in Heliopolis with the Egyptian priests and taught them much: He explained astrology and the other sciences to them, saying that the Babylonians and he himself had obtained this knowledge.”³ The ancient Jewish historian Josephus likewise recorded that Abraham taught the Egyptians astronomy: “He communicated to them arithmetic, and delivered to them the science of astronomy; for, before Abram came into Egypt, they were unacquainted with those parts of learning.”⁴ To be sure, mathematics and astronomy were well-developed in Egypt by the time Abraham arrived for his brief sojourn in that land. These reports by early Jewish and Christian writers that depict Abraham as being the first one to introduce these sciences into Egypt should not be taken at face value as factual historical reports. However, they are worth highlighting in this context since their overall depiction of Abraham as a learned astronomer parallels the Book of Abraham’s account in some rather interesting ways. It should also be kept in mind that the Book of Abraham does not actually claim that Abraham was the first to teach the Egyptians astronomy. Facsimile 3 of the Book of Abraham is said to depict Abraham merely “reasoning” upon the principles of astronomy in the king’s court, not introducing them for the first time.

Another recurring theme in these ancient extrabiblical accounts about Abraham is his having a vision of the cosmos and being brought into the presence of God.⁵ Medieval Jewish sources also speak of Abraham having in his possession a “glowing precious stone” with which he read the stars and performed miracles:

Abraham wore a glowing stone around his neck. Some say that it was a pearl, others that it was a jewel. The light emitted by that jewel was like

2. Tvedtnes, Hauglid, and Gee, *Traditions about the Early Life of Abraham*, 537–47.

3. Tvedtnes, Hauglid, and Gee, *Traditions about the Early Life of Abraham*, 8–9. The ancients tended to conflate the practices of “astrology” (studying the stars in an attempt to detect their supposed influence on mortal lives and affairs) and “astronomy” (the scientific study of celestial objects and their movements) and viewed them as overlapping endeavors. For this reason, the terms “astrology” and “astronomy” are often used interchangeably both in ancient sources and by modern scholars and translators working with these sources. The modern bifurcation of these two practices (which also widely regards the former as a pseudoscience) was not so neatly delineated by the ancients.

4. Tvedtnes, Hauglid, and Gee, *Traditions about the Early Life of Abraham*, 49.

5. Jared W. Ludlow, “Abraham’s Visions of the Heavens,” in Gee and Hauglid, *Astronomy, Papyrus, and Covenant*, 57–73.

the light of the sun, illuminating the entire world. Abraham used that stone as an astrolabe to study the motion of the stars, and with its help he became a master astrologer. For his power of reading the stars, Abraham was much sought after by the potentates of East and West. So too did that glowing precious stone bring immediate healing to any sick person who looked into it. At the moment when Abraham took leave of this world, the precious stone raised itself and flew up to heaven. God took it and hung it on the wheel of the sun.⁶

With a few exceptions, the extrabiblical sources that parallel the account in the Book of Abraham were unavailable to Joseph Smith. Even with those sources that could have been available to him, such as the writings of Josephus, it is not clear how much exposure or access Joseph Smith had to them or how much they influenced his thinking.⁷ “Josephus was known to Oliver Cowdery and theoretically known to Joseph Smith, but it is not clear that Joseph Smith actually read much, if anything, out of Josephus before he translated the Book of Abraham. While some elements of the Book of Abraham agree with Josephus, there are important disagreements as well.”⁸ For instance, unlike Josephus, the Book of Abraham does not depict the patriarch as introducing mathematics or arithmetic to the Egyptians. It also specifically says Abraham reasoned with the king and his court on astronomical matters, something also missing from Josephus. “In this respect, the Book of Abraham account is actually closer to an account given by Artapanus, an ancient Jewish author who lived in Egypt sometime before the first century BCE, since he specifically reported that Abram taught Pharaoh astronomy.”⁹

It is also important to keep in mind that these later sources do not necessarily always reflect an accurate history of Abraham. “Not all [ancient]

6. Howard Schwartz, *Tree of Souls: The Mythology of Judaism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 332, citing *b. Bava Batra* 16b; *Zohar* 1:11a–11b, *Idra Rabbah*. As Schwartz comments, “this talmudic legend about a glowing stone that Abraham wore around his neck is a part of the chain of legends about that glowing jewel, known as the *Tzohar*, which was first given to Adam and Eve when they were expelled from the Garden of Eden and also came into the possession of Noah, who hung it in the ark. . . . This version of the legend adds the detail that the glowing stone was also an astrolabe, with which Abraham could study the stars.”

7. Lincoln H. Blumell, “Palmyra and Jerusalem: Joseph Smith’s Scriptural Texts and the Writings of Flavius Josephus,” in *Approaching Antiquity: Joseph Smith and the Ancient World*, ed. Lincoln H. Blumell, Matthew J. Grey, and Andrew H. Hedges (Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2015), 356–406, esp. 371–73.

8. John Gee, *An Introduction to the Book of Abraham* (Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2017), 159.

9. Blumell, “Palmyra and Jerusalem,” 372.

authors treated their sources the same way. Some authors retold the tales they read in their own words, adding more vivid and imaginative details. Other authors repeated their sources word for word. Some authors expanded their stories, while others abbreviated them, and still others left them unchanged. This makes it difficult to come up with a general theory [for their reliability] that covers all cases.”¹⁰ What is important for the Book of Abraham is not that these sources somehow *prove* the book is true. Rather, they demonstrate that important themes and narrative details in the Book of Abraham fit comfortably in the ancient world and do not always fit comfortably in Joseph Smith’s nineteenth-century environment.¹¹ “The nonbiblical traditions about Abraham underscore the pervasive influence this great patriarch has had on ancient and modern peoples. Because the Book of Abraham parallels so many nonbiblical stories, it is clearly part of the same tradition.”¹²

While they perhaps do not rise to the level of *proof*, these parallels are still evidence for the Book of Abraham because “it is difficult to argue that Joseph Smith wrote the Book of Abraham using [these] Abrahamic stories because most of them were not available to him, and those that were often contained details that do not match the Book of Abraham. On the other hand, the ancient existence of a Book of Abraham can explain why these stories existed.”¹³

Further Reading

- Hauglid, Brian M. “The Book of Abraham and Muslim Tradition.” In *Astronomy, Papyrus, and Covenant*, edited by John Gee and Brian M. Hauglid, 131–46. Provo, Utah: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 2005.
- Nibley, Hugh. *An Approach to the Book of Abraham*, edited by John Gee, 375–468. Collected Works of Hugh Nibley 18. Salt Lake City: Deseret Book; Provo, Utah: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, 2009.
- Tvedtnes, John A., Brian M. Hauglid, and John Gee, eds. *Traditions about the Early Life of Abraham*. Provo, Utah: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 2001.

10. Gee, *Introduction to the Book of Abraham*, 158.

11. See the discussion in Andrew W. Hedges, “A Wanderer in a Strange Land: Abraham in America, 1800–1850,” in Gee and Hauglid, *Astronomy, Papyrus, and Covenant*, 175–87.

12. Tvedtnes, Hauglid, and Gee, *Traditions about the Early Life of Abraham*, xxxv.

13. Gee, *Introduction to the Book of Abraham*, 160.