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The Ancient Egyptian View of Abraham

Some might ask how likely it would have been for the ancient Egyptians to have known anything about the biblical figure Abraham. In fact, evidence survives today indicating that stories about Abraham were known to the ancient Egyptians as early as the time of the composition of the Joseph Smith Papyri (ca. 330–30 BC).

The earliest documented appearance of the biblical story of Abraham in ancient Egypt dates to the third century BC. It was at this time when the Old Testament (or Hebrew Bible) was translated into Greek in the Egyptian city of Alexandria. This translation is commonly called the Septuagint.¹ In addition to the biblical text, extrabiblical stories about Abraham circulated in Egypt during this time. For example,

- “during the reign of Ptolemy I, Hecateus of Abdera traveled to Thebes and learned stories about Abraham from Egyptian priests; he wrote these stories in a book called *On Abraham and the Egyptians*. This work is now unfortunately lost, but Clement of Alexandria, a second-century AD Egyptian Christian, quoted a short passage from it in which the worship of idols is condemned.”²

1. Karen H. Jobes and Moisés Silvia, *Invitation to the Septuagint* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2000); Albert Pietersma and Benjamin G. Wright, eds., *A New English Translation of the Septuagint and the Other Greek Translations Traditionally Included under That Title* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007).

2. John Gee, *An Introduction to the Book of Abraham* (Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2017), 51; compare Clement, *Stromata* 5.14. The authorship of this source is disputed among modern scholars, with some insisting the texts attributed to Hecataeus are pseudepigraphical. For a discussion, see Bezalel Bar-Kochva, *The Image of the Jews in Greek Literature: The Hellenistic Period* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010), 90–135.

- “The writer Eupolemus, who lived under Egyptian rule in Palestine in the second century BC, recounts how Abraham lived in Heliopolis (On) and taught astronomy and other sciences to the Egyptian priests. In connection with Abraham, Eupolemus seems to think that the Egyptians descended from Canaan.”³
- “In the first century BC, the Egyptian Jew Artapanus wrote an account of Abraham teaching astronomy to the Egyptian Pharaoh.”⁴
- “Philo, a first-century AD Egyptian Jew, claimed that Abraham studied astronomy, the motion of the stars, meteorology, and mathematics, and used his reasoning on these subjects to understand God.”⁵
- “The *Testament of Abraham* describes Abraham’s tour of the next life before he dies. Scholars think that this work was written by an Egyptian Jew around the first century AD. It is notable for its reinterpretation of the Egyptian judgment scene in a Jewish fashion. This text was read liturgically the Sunday before Christmas during the Egyptian month of Khoiak.”⁶
- “[A] fragmentary text from Egypt about Abraham describes how the king (the word used is *pharaoh*) tries to sacrifice Abraham, but Abraham is delivered by an angel of the Lord. Abraham later teaches the members of the royal court about the true God using astronomy.”⁷

3. Gee, *Introduction to the Book of Abraham*, 51; compare R. Doran, “Pseudo-Eupolemus,” in *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, ed. James H. Charlesworth, 2 vols. (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1983), 2:881. As with the works attributed to Hecateus, the authorship of the texts attributed to Eupolemus remains disputed. See Ben Zion Wacholder, “Pseudo-Eupolemus’ Two Greek Fragments on the Life of Abraham,” *Hebrew Union College Annual* 34 (1963): 83–113. Regardless of these texts’ true authorship, they nevertheless do preserve accounts about Abraham circulating in ancient Egypt (and the broader ancient Jewish world) that parallel the Book of Abraham.

4. Gee, *Introduction to the Book of Abraham*, 51; J. J. Collins, “Artapanus,” in Charlesworth, *Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, 2:897.

5. Gee, *Introduction to the Book of Abraham*, 51; compare “On Abraham,” in *The Works of Philo: Complete and Unabridged*, trans. C. D. Yonge (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson Publishers, 1993), 417.

6. Gee, *Introduction to the Book of Abraham*, 51; compare Dale C. Allison, *Testament of Abraham* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2003); and Jared Ludlow, “Appropriation of Egyptian Judgment in the Testament of Abraham?,” in *Evolving Egypt: Innovation, Appropriation, and Reinterpretation in Ancient Egypt*, ed. Kerry Muhlestein (Oxford: Archaeopress, 2012), 99–103.

7. Gee, *Introduction to the Book of Abraham*, 52, emphasis in original; compare the Coptic homily translated and discussed in John Gee, “An Egyptian View of Abraham,” in *Bountiful Harvest: Essays in Honor of S. Kent Brown*, ed. Andrew C. Skinner, D. Morgan Davis, and Carl Griffin (Provo, Utah: Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship,

An additional significant body of evidence for the Egyptian view of Abraham comes from a collection of texts commonly called the Greek Magical Papyri or the Theban Magical Library. This corpus of texts from the ancient Egyptian city of Thebes preserves “a variety of magical spells and formulae, hymns and rituals. The extant texts are mainly from the second century B.C. to the fifth century A.D.”⁸ Significantly, many biblical names and figures are used in these texts alongside Egyptian and Greek names and figures.⁹ The name for this common ancient phenomenon is syncretism, where elements of different religions or traditions were harmonized together into a new “synthetic” religious paradigm. In some important ways, the form of religion widely practiced by the Egyptians during the time of the Joseph Smith Papyri was a highly syncretic one.

Why were biblical figures syncretized with Egyptian religious or magical practices? We cannot know entirely for sure, but one very plausible reason is that “Israelite religious beliefs and stories had a number of things to offer the Egyptians. . . . Israelite religion could offer the Egyptians stories associated with sanctity and sacred space, amulets, angels, a personal relationship with deity, and a god who acted in history.”¹⁰ Whatever the exact reason might be,

a noncomprehensive list of nondivine names [in these texts] includes Abimelech, Abraham, Adam, Ammon, Aziel, Dardanos, David, Emmanuel, Gabriel, Gomorrah, Isaac, Israel, Jacob, Jeremiah, Jerusalem, Judah, Lot, Lot’s wife, Michael, Moses, Solomon, and even Osiris-Michael. Names for the Israelite deity include Adonai, Adonai Sabaoth (as well as just Sabaoth, which is more common), Elohim, El, God of the Hebrews, Yaho (the abbreviated version of Jehovah that was often employed by Jews in Egypt), and blessed Lord God of Abraham, along with many variations and combinations of these names and titles that undoubtedly refer

2011), 137–56. Additional extrabiblical texts and traditions about Abraham can be accessed in 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).

8. Hans Dieter Betz, “Introduction to the Greek Magical Papyri,” in *The Greek Magical Papyri in Translation*, ed. Hans Dieter Betz (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), xli.

9. Kerry Muhlestein, “Abraham, Isaac, and Osiris-Michael: The Use of Biblical Figures in Egyptian Religion, a Survey,” in *Achievements and Problems of Modern Egyptology: Proceedings of the International Conference Held in Moscow on September 29–October 2, 2009*, ed. Galina A. Belova (Moscow: Russian Academy of Sciences, 2012), 246–59.

10. Kerry Muhlestein, “The Religious and Cultural Background of Joseph Smith Papyrus I,” *Journal of the Book of Mormon and Other Restoration Scripture* 22, no. 1 (2013): 26.

to the Hebrew God, such as “He who drew back the Jordan River,” or referencing the God who drove the winds at the Red Sea and met someone at the foot of the Holy Mount to reveal his great name.¹¹

Abraham and Moses were two popular figures used by these Egyptian priests in their magical practices.¹² They were so popular, in fact, that an early Egyptian Christian writer named Origen even voiced his outrage that his pagan neighbors were invoking “the God of Abraham” without properly knowing who Abraham really was.¹³

From the evidence of the Greek Magical Papyri, we can conclude that “a group of priests from Thebes possessed, read, understood, and employed biblical and extrabiblical texts, most especially texts about Abraham and Moses.”¹⁴ This evidence, along with the other evidence for a knowledge of Abraham circulating in ancient Egypt, bolsters confidence in the Book of Abraham’s authenticity by providing it with a plausible ancient Egyptian historical and literary context.¹⁵

Further Reading

Gee, John. “The Egyptian View of Abraham.” In *An Introduction to the Book of Abraham*, 49–55. Salt Lake City: Deseret Book; Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 2017.

Muhlestein, Kerry. “Abraham, Isaac, and Osiris-Michael: The Use of Biblical Figures in Egyptian Religion.” In *Achievements and Problems of Modern Egyptology*, edited by Galina A. Belova, 246–59. Moscow: Russian Academy of Sciences, 2012.

———. “The Religious and Cultural Background of Joseph Smith Papyrus I.” *Journal of the Book of Mormon and Other Restoration Scripture* 22, no. 1 (2013): 20–33.

11. Muhlestein, “Religious and Cultural Background of Joseph Smith Papyrus I,” 23.

12. Spells from this corpus that invoke Abraham (or Abraam) can be read in Betz, *Greek Magical Papyri in Translation*, 8, 125, 164, 171, 191, 194, 262, 276, 300, 310.

13. Muhlestein, “Religious and Cultural Background of Joseph Smith Papyrus I,” 26, citing Origen, *Contra Celsum* 1.22. The spells Origen may have had in mind include one for “driving out demons” that includes the line “Hail, God of Abraham; hail, God of Isaac; hail, God of Jacob” (Papyri Graecae Magicae [PGM] IV.1235, in Betz, *Greek Magical Papyri in Translation*, 62); or one that reads, “I conjure you all by the god of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, that you obey my authority completely” (PGM XXXV.15, in Betz, *Greek Magical Papyri in Translation*, 268).

14. Muhlestein, “Religious and Cultural Background of Joseph Smith Papyrus I,” 30.

15. See the extensive discussion in John Gee, “Abracadabra, Isaac and Jacob,” *FARMS Review of Books on the Book of Mormon* 7, no. 1 (1995): 19–84.