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## Approaching the Facsimiles

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FIGURE 27. Facsimile 1 of the Book of Abraham as it appeared in the March 1, 1842, issue of the *Times and Seasons* under the editorship of Joseph Smith. © Intellectual Reserve, Inc. Courtesy Church History Library, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

## Approaching the Facsimiles

As “the only illustrations in our scriptures,” the facsimiles of the Book of Abraham “attract attention not only because of their rough-hewn quality but by their very existence as a visual medium in the midst of the written word.”<sup>1</sup> Latter-day Saint scholars and interested laypersons have offered a number of different approaches to understanding the facsimiles.<sup>2</sup> Some of the more common approaches to the facsimiles include the following:

1. The facsimiles were original to Abraham. To interpret them we should look to how Egyptians in Abraham’s day, or Abraham himself, would have understood them.

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1. John Gee, “A Method for Studying the Facsimiles,” *FARMS Review* 19, no. 1 (2007): 347.

2. John Gee, *A Guide to the Joseph Smith Papyri* (Provo, Utah: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 2000), 33–41; Gee, “Method for Studying the Facsimiles,” 347–53; John Gee, “The Facsimiles,” in *An Introduction to the Book of Abraham* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book; Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 2017), 143–56; Hugh Nibley, “What, Exactly, Is the Purpose and Significance of the Facsimiles in the Book of Abraham?,” *Ensign* 6, no. 3 (March 1976): 34–36; Hugh Nibley, “The Facsimiles of the Book of Abraham: A Response,” in *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, 2009), 493–501; Michael D. Rhodes, “Teaching the Book of Abraham Facsimiles,” *Religious Educator* 4, no. 2 (2003): 115–23; Michael D. Rhodes, “Facsimiles from the Book of Abraham,” in *The Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, ed. Daniel H. Ludlow, 4 vols. (New York: Macmillan, 1992), 1:135–37; Kevin L. Barney, “The Facsimiles and Semitic Adaptation of Existing Sources,” in *Astronomy, Papyrus, and Covenant*, ed. John Gee and Brian M. Hauglid (Provo, Utah: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 2005), 107–30; Allen J. Fletcher, *A Study Guide to the Facsimiles of the Book of Abraham* (Springville, Utah: Cedar Fort, 2006); Terry Givens with Brian M. Hauglid, *The Pearl of Greatest Price: Mormonism’s Most Controversial Scripture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), 142–53.

2. The facsimiles were original to Abraham but were modified over time for use by the ancient Egyptians. The facsimiles as currently preserved are much later and altered copies of Abraham's originals. To interpret them we should consider the underlying Abrahamic elements and compare them with how the Egyptians understood these images.<sup>3</sup>
3. The facsimiles were connected to the Book of Abraham when the Joseph Smith Papyri were created in the Ptolemaic period (ca. 330–30 BC). To interpret them we should look to what Egyptians of that time generally may have thought these drawings represent.<sup>4</sup>
4. The facsimiles were connected to the Book of Abraham for the first time in the Ptolemaic period, but to interpret them we should look specifically to how Egyptian priests who were integrating Jewish, Greek, and Mesopotamian religious practices into native Egyptian practices would have understood them.<sup>5</sup>
5. The facsimiles were connected to the Book of Abraham in the Ptolemaic period, but to interpret them we should look to how Jews of that era would have understood them.<sup>6</sup>
6. The facsimiles were never part of the Book of Abraham but instead were completely reinterpreted by Joseph Smith to artistically depict the text he revealed or translated. We can make sense of Joseph's interpretations by expanding our understanding of his role as a "translator."<sup>7</sup>
7. The facsimiles were never part of the Book of Abraham, but Joseph Smith, by revelation, perceived the meaning of the figures in their ancient Egyptian context and based on similarities syncretized many of them to details within the context of Abraham's life. To understand Joseph Smith's explanations in this approach, it is important to understand that some figures he interprets in their ancient Egyptian context and some figures he overlays with an Abrahamic detail due to perceived similarities between the

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3. Robert C. Webb, "A Critical Examination of the Fac-Similes in the Book of Abraham," *Improvement Era* 16, no. 5 (March 1913): 435–54; H. Donl Peterson, *The Story of the Book of Abraham: Mummies, Manuscripts, and Mormonism* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1995), 252; Rhodes, "Teaching the Book of Abraham Facsimiles," 115–23.

4. Gee, "Method for Studying the Facsimiles," 347–53.

5. 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): 20–33.

6. Barney, "Facsimiles and Semitic Adaptation," 107–30.

7. Givens, *Pearl of Greatest Price*, 180–202.

Egyptian and Abrahamic concepts. This approach still requires an understanding of the figures in their ancient Egyptian context but does not assume all of Joseph Smith's explanations are how the Egyptians would have strictly understood them.<sup>8</sup>

Each of these approaches has its respective strengths and weaknesses, but each also requires certain assumptions at the outset in order to accept it, and it appears that no one single explanation on its own can account for all the available evidence. Although not all of these paradigms will be explored here, a few examples illustrating this point are worth bringing up. For instance, the first paradigm is a more straightforward way of thinking about the facsimiles but is severely undermined by the fact that the Joseph Smith Papyri date to many centuries after Abraham's lifetime.<sup>9</sup> The second, third, and fourth paradigms are each compelling to varying degrees since they can account for the instances where Joseph Smith's interpretations of the facsimiles align with those of other Egyptologists, but no single one of them can account for his interpretations in their entirety from an Egyptological perspective.

Whichever paradigm one adopts, it seems clear that Joseph Smith's explanations of the facsimiles were original to himself (none of the explanations appear next to the illustrations on the papyri he possessed).<sup>10</sup> "There are aspects of [these explanations] that match what Egyptologists say they mean. Some [of them] are quite compelling. . . . However, as we look at the entirety of any of the facsimiles, an Egyptological interpretation does not match what Joseph Smith said about them."<sup>11</sup> This is complicated by the fact that even though not all of Joseph Smith's

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8. John S. Thompson, "We May Not Understand Our Words': The Book of Abraham and the Concept of Translation in *The Pearl of Greatest Price*," *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 41 (2020): 24–29.

9. Michael D. Rhodes, *The Hor Book of Breathings: A Translation and Commentary* (Provo, Utah: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 2002), 3.

10. With regard to the authorship of the explanations of the facsimiles, it should be kept in mind that "while we do not know if Joseph Smith is the original author of these interpretations, we know he participated in preparing the published interpretations and gave editorial approval to them." Kerry Muhlestein, "Joseph Smith's Biblical View of Egypt," 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, Brigham Young University; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2015), 469 n. 10. Compare the observations made in Quinten Zehn Barney, "The Neglected Facsimile: An Examination and Comparative Study of Facsimile No. 3 of *The Book of Abraham*" (master's thesis, Brigham Young University, 2019), 57–60.

11. Kerry Muhlestein, quoted in Stephen Smoot, "Egyptology and the Book of Abraham: An Interview with Egyptologist Kerry Muhlestein," FairMormon Blog

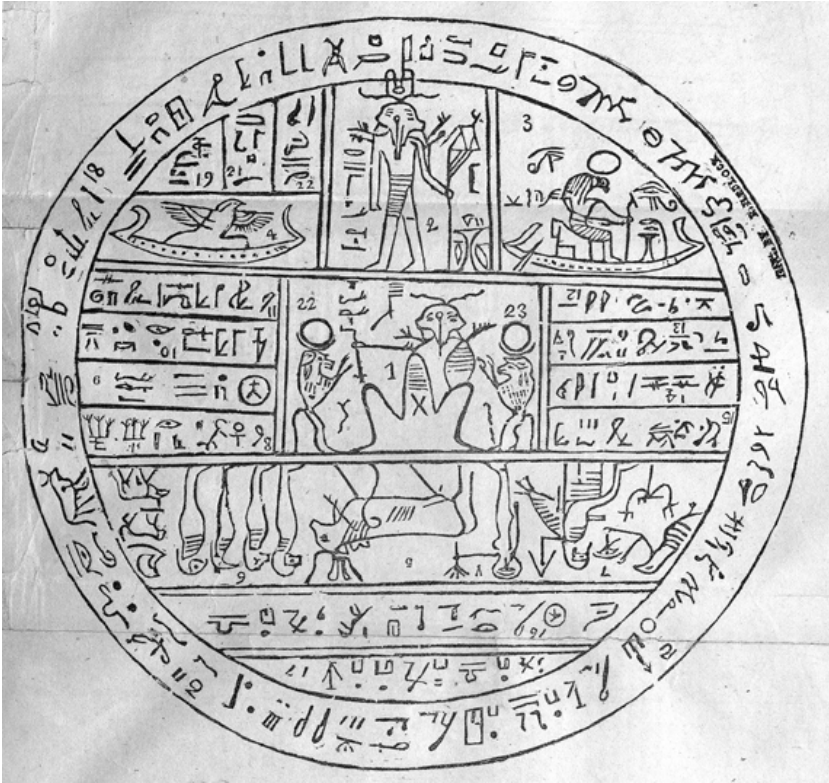


FIGURE 28. Facsimile 2 of the Book of Abraham as it appeared in the March 15, 1842, issue of the *Times and Seasons* under the editorship of Joseph Smith. © Intellectual Reserve, Inc. Courtesy Church History Library, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

explanations of the facsimiles in their entirety agree with how modern Egyptologists understand these illustrations, in many instances they do accurately reflect ancient Egyptian and Semitic concepts.<sup>12</sup> This requires us to carefully unpack the assumptions we bring when approaching the facsimiles under any of the theoretical paradigms listed above.

(November 14, 2013), <https://www.fairmormon.org/blog/2013/11/14/egyptology-and-the-book-of-abraham-an-interview-with-egyptologist-kerry-muhlestein>.

12. In addition to the sources cited above, see additionally Michael D. Rhodes, “The Joseph Smith Hypocephalus . . . Twenty Years Later,” unpublished manuscript, [1997], <https://www.magicgatebg.com/Books/Joseph%20Smith%20Hypocephalus.pdf>; John Gee, “Abracadabra, Isaac, and Jacob,” *Review of Books on the Book of Mormon* 7, no. 1 (1995): 19–85; and Hugh Nibley and Michael D. Rhodes, *One Eternal Round*, 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).



FIGURE 29. Facsimile 3 of the Book of Abraham as it appeared in the May 16, 1842, issue of the *Times and Seasons* under the editorship of Joseph Smith. © Intellectual Reserve, Inc. Courtesy Church History Library, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

Despite some important advances in scholarship, “we [still] do not [entirely] know to what we really should compare the facsimiles.” For instance, we must ask if Joseph Smith meant to give us “an interpretation [of the facsimiles] that ancient Egyptians would have held, or one that only a small group of priests interested in Abraham would have held, or one that a group of ancient Jews in Egypt would have held, or something another group altogether would have held.” Or, alternatively, “was he giving us an interpretation we needed to receive for our spiritual benefit regardless of how any ancient groups would have seen these?” The fact is that we don’t know for sure. While we “can make a pretty good case for the idea that some Egyptians could have viewed Facsimile 1 the way Joseph Smith presents it, [we are still] not sure that is the methodology we should be employing. We just don’t know enough about what Joseph Smith was doing to be sure about any possible comparisons, or lack thereof.”<sup>13</sup>

What is clear from all of this is that “much more work needs to be done before we can understand the facsimiles in their ancient Egyptian setting, and only then will it be meaningful to ask whether that understanding matches that of Joseph Smith (to the extent that we understand

13. Muhlestein, quoted in Smoot, “Egyptology and the Book of Abraham.”

even that).”<sup>14</sup> For example, “Facsimile 3 has always been the most neglected of the three facsimiles in the Book of Abraham. Unfortunately, most of what has been said about this facsimile is seriously wanting at best and highly erroneous at worst.”<sup>15</sup> Some valuable work in recent years, however, has helped remedy this by better situating this facsimile in its ancient Egyptian context.<sup>16</sup> As that context has become clearer, elements of Joseph Smith’s explanations have become more plausible (although other elements remain at odds with current Egyptological theories).

Whichever theoretical paradigm one adopts in approaching the facsimiles, a respectable case can be made that with a number of his explanations Joseph Smith accurately captured ancient Egyptian concepts (and even scored a few bull’s-eyes with his explanations) that would have otherwise been beyond his natural ability to know.<sup>17</sup> Any honest approach to the facsimiles must recognize this and take this into account. At the same time, however, this is not necessarily conclusive evidence that the facsimiles themselves were actually used as illustrations for Abraham’s record in antiquity. For now, then, the best approach to the facsimiles would be to remain open-minded and inquisitive and to keep asking the best questions based on the best available evidence and information.

### Further Reading

Gee, John. “Book of Abraham, Facsimiles of.” In *Pearl of Great Price Reference Companion*, ed. Dennis L. Largey, 54–60. Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2017.

———. “A Method for Studying the Facsimiles.” *FARMS Review* 19, no. 1 (2007): 347–53.

Rhodes, Michael D. “Teaching the Book of Abraham Facsimiles.” *Religious Educator* 4, no. 2 (2003): 115–23.

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14. Gee, “Method for Studying the Facsimiles,” 353.

15. John Gee, “Facsimile 3 and Book of the Dead 125,” in *Astronomy, Papyrus, and Covenant: Proceedings of the 1999 Book of Abraham Conference*, ed. John Gee and Brian M. Hauglid (Provo, Utah: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 2005), 95.

16. Gee, “Facsimile 3 and Book of the Dead 125,” 95–105; Barney, “Neglected Facsimile.”

17. “Egyptian was not really understood in Joseph Smith’s day. Not a single inscription in either hieratic or hieroglyphs had been completely translated before his death, and none were published until seven years afterwards. Joseph Smith was not in the tradition of Champollion to which Egyptology today belongs. Any knowledge he may have had did not come from that source, and indeed, everyone is in agreement about that.” John Gee, “Joseph Smith and Ancient Egypt,” in Blumell, Grey, and Hedges, *Approaching Antiquity*, 443.