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A Semitic View of the Facsimiles

Latter-day Saint scholars and interested laypersons have offered a number of different approaches to interpreting the facsimiles and the validity of Joseph Smith's interpretations.¹ One such scholar, Kevin L. Barney, has articulated an insightful theory for interpreting the facsimiles that is worth careful consideration.²

Responding to the legitimate questions that have been raised by Egyptologists concerning Joseph Smith's interpretations of the facsimiles, Barney proposed in a 2005 article "that the facsimiles may not have been drawn by Abraham's hand," as has sometimes been assumed by Latter-day Saints, "but may have been Egyptian religious vignettes that were adopted or adapted by an Egyptian-Jewish redactor as illustrations of the Book of Abraham." Barney further "illustrate[d the] general processes of Jewish adaptation of Egyptian sources" by offering "three specific examples from the Greco-Roman period (the same period when the Joseph Smith Papyri were produced) that each relates in some way to Abraham." Using these examples, Barney concluded "that such Jewish adaptation of Egyptian sources was common during this time period and would explain the adaptation of the facsimiles to illustrate the Book of Abraham, which may have come under this redactor's care as part of the ancient transmission of the text."³ The first example cited by Barney

1. John Gee, "A Method for Studying the Facsimiles," *FARMS Review* 19, no. 1 (2007): 347–53.

2. 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. For an earlier treatment that converges with Barney's thinking on many points, see Blake T. Ostler, "Abraham: An Egyptian Connection," *FARMS Report* (1981).

3. Barney, "Facsimiles and Semitic Adaptation," 108.

is the apocryphal Testament of Abraham (probably composed in Greek in the first century AD in Egypt).

The *Testament of Abraham* tells the story of how when Abraham had lived the full measure of his mortal existence, God sent the archangel Michael—his “commander in chief”—to inform Abraham so that he might arrange his affairs prior to his death. Abraham refuses to follow Michael, however, and desires a tour of the whole inhabited world before he dies. Michael and Abraham survey the world in a divine chariot, and whenever Abraham sees someone sinning he asks for the sinner to be struck down. God then puts an end to the tour, since his own practice is to be patient with sinners in order to give them an opportunity to repent. Abraham is then shown the judgment, which is the scene we will examine in some detail below. Abraham repents of his harshness, and the sinners who had been struck down at his request are restored to life. Abraham, however, still refuses to follow Michael. So God sends Death, who, by a deception, gets Abraham’s soul to accompany him, whence he returns to the presence of God.⁴

The judgment scene in the Testament of Abraham, in particular, is striking. As summarized by Barney,

Abraham sees two fiery-looking angels driving myriad souls to judgment. The judgment hall is situated between a narrow gate for the use of the righteous and a broad gate for the wicked. In the judgment hall there is a terrifying throne, and seated on the throne is a wondrous man, with an appearance like unto a son of God. In front of this figure is a crystal-like table, covered with gold and fine linen. Resting on the table is a book. On either side of the table are angels holding papyrus and ink. In front of the table is a light-bearing angel holding a balance, and on his left is a fiery angel holding a trumpet full of fire. The man on the throne judges the souls. The two angels with papyrus record; the one on the right records the deceased’s righteous deeds, and the one on the left records sins. The angel with the balance weighs the souls, and the fiery angel tries them with fire. Michael informs Abraham that this scene represents judgment and recompense.

Abraham asks Michael specifically who all of these figures are and is informed that the judge seated upon the throne is Abel, who judges men until the Parousia (second coming). At the Parousia, everyone is to be judged by the twelve tribes of Israel, and, finally, God himself shall judge all men, so that the judgment may be established by three witnesses. Michael tells Abraham that the angels on the right and left

4. Barney, “Facsimiles and Semitic Adaptation,” 116–17.

record righteous deeds and sins. The sunlike . . . angel holding the balance is the archangel Dokiël, the righteous balance-bearer, who weighs the righteous deeds and sins. The fiery angel who tests the works of men with fire is the archangel Purouel. Everything is tested both by fire and by balance.⁵

This, Barney rightly notes, is significant because the Testament of Abraham appears to be drawing directly from the judgment imagery in chapter 125 from the Egyptian Book of the Dead.⁶ As another scholar has more recently argued, “There are many obvious parallels between the *Testament of Abraham* and the traditional Egyptian judgment scene, especially regarding the judgment by scales,” and it appears that the author of the *Testament of Abraham* was “very familiar with Egyptian judgment scenes” and perhaps even “playing with them as he had with biblical figures to weave a memorable tale” and develop his understanding of the final judgment.⁷

The second example used by Barney is the attested syncretization of the Egyptian god Osiris with the biblical figure of Abraham.⁸ As Barney notes, some scholars have posited the dependence of Jesus’s parable of Lazarus and the rich man in Luke 16:19–31 on an older Egyptian version of the story.⁹ In the Egyptian text known as the tale of Setne, a boy named Si-Osiris (“son of Osiris”) and his father witness “two funerals: first, that of a rich man, shrouded in fine linen, loudly lamented and abundantly honored; then, that of a poor man, wrapped in a straw mat, unaccompanied and unmourned. The father says that he would rather have the lot of the rich man than that of the pauper.”¹⁰ To show his father the folly of this way of thinking, Si-Osiris takes him to the underworld, where the rich man who had an elaborate funeral is punished while the pauper who had no dignified burial is glorified and exalted in the presence of the god Osiris himself. “The reason for this disparate treatment

5. Barney, “Facsimiles and Semitic Adaptation,” 117.

6. Barney, “Facsimiles and Semitic Adaptation,” 117–18.

7. 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), 102.

8. Barney, “Facsimiles and Semitic Adaptation,” 119–21.

9. Hugo Gressmann, *Vom reichen Mann und armen Lazarus: Eine literargeschichtliche Studie* (Berlin: Königliche Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1918); K. Grobel, “. . . Whose Name Was Neves,” *New Testament Studies* 10 (1963–1964): 373–82; Outi Lehtipuu, *The Afterlife Imagery in Luke’s Story of the Rich Man and Lazarus* (Leiden, Neth.: Brill, 2007), 11–18.

10. Barney, “Facsimiles and Semitic Adaptation,” 120–21.

is that, at the judgment, the good deeds of the pauper outweighed the bad, but with the rich man the opposite was true.”¹¹ As explained by Barney, “Once again we are able to see how the Egyptian story has been transformed in Semitic dress. . . . The ‘bosom of Abraham’ [from the Lucan parable] represents . . . the Egyptian abode of the dead. And, most remarkably, Abraham is a Jewish substitute for the pagan god Osiris—just as is the case in Facsimiles 1 and 3.”¹²

Finally, Barney draws attention to another apocryphal text, the *Apocalypse of Abraham*, “a kind of companion text to the *Testament of Abraham*.” The *Apocalypse of Abraham* “tells the story of how Abraham in his youth perceived that idols were simply creations of men and not really gods. After leaving his father’s house, Abraham is commanded to offer a sacrifice so that God will reveal great things to him. God sends his angel Iaoel to take Abraham on a tour of heaven, during which he sees seven visions.”¹³ Citing earlier work by Latter-day Saint Egyptologist Michael Rhodes,¹⁴ Barney points to “what appear to be possible allusions to a hypocephalus [the kind of circular object that Facsimile 2 is] in the *Apocalypse of Abraham*.”

During his vision Abraham is shown “the fulness of the whole world and its circle,” which appears to be a description of a hypocephalus. This vision includes the plan of the universe, “what is in the heavens, on the earth, in the sea, and in the abyss,” which are very close to the words used in the left middle portion of the Joseph Smith hypocephalus. The *Apocalypse* also includes a description of four fiery living creatures, each with four faces: that of a lion, a man, an ox, and an eagle. This is almost certainly a Semitic transformation of the Sons of Horus (via Ezekiel 1–2), which are represented as figure 6 of Facsimile 2.¹⁵

Based on these examples, Barney argues that “studying only the Egyptian context of the facsimiles will never yield a complete explanation of the significance of Joseph’s interpretations. We need to be able to look at them the way [a hypothetical ancient Jewish redactor] did, as Semitized illustrations of the Book of Abraham. When we see them

11. Barney, “Facsimiles and Semitic Adaptation,” 121.

12. Barney, “Facsimiles and Semitic Adaptation,” 121; compare Grobel, “. . . Whose Name Was Neves,” 380.

13. Barney, “Facsimiles and Semitic Adaptation,” 121.

14. Michael D. Rhodes, “The Joseph Smith Hypocephalus . . . Seventeen Years Later,” FARMS paper (1994), 6.

15. Barney, “Facsimiles and Semitic Adaptation,” 121–22.

from this perspective, our vision gains clarity, and the facsimiles and Joseph's interpretations come into focus."¹⁶

While this theory is compelling, it does require Latter-day Saints to reject some traditional assumptions about the facsimiles, such as the belief that, as preserved in the Joseph Smith Papyri, they were personally drawn by Abraham himself.¹⁷ This theory likewise presupposes a more complex transmission of the Book of Abraham text than perhaps traditionally recognized.¹⁸ However, acceptance of these two points to accommodate Barney's theory is by no means fatal to the inspiration of the Book of Abraham and in fact may even help clear up some of the objections Egyptologists have made against Joseph Smith's interpretation of the facsimiles.¹⁹

Ultimately, there is still much to discuss and consider when it comes to the interpretation of the facsimiles of the Book of Abraham. Barney's theory, while perhaps not definitive, is "valuable and attractive" and offers important "new avenues for further research."²⁰ It also provides one way to understand Joseph Smith's interpretations of the facsimiles in a plausible ancient light.²¹

16. Barney, "Facsimiles and Semitic Adaptation," 119.

17. John Gee, *A Guide to the Joseph Smith Papyri* (Provo, Utah: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 2000), 28–30, explores different theories for understanding and explaining the facsimiles.

18. Barney, "Facsimiles and Semitic Adaptation," 124–25; compare Gee, *Guide to the Joseph Smith Papyri*, 27–28.

19. Barney, "Facsimiles and Semitic Adaptation," 126–28.

20. Kerry Muhlestein, "Approaching Understandings in the Book of Abraham," *FARMS Review* 18, no. 2 (2006): 239; compare Gee, "Method for Studying the Facsimiles," 352.

21. There are several potential paradigms for evaluating Joseph Smith's interpretations of the facsimiles, each resting on certain assumptions that require analysis and unpacking. "There are aspects of Joseph Smith's interpretations of the facsimiles that match what Egyptologists say they mean. Some aspects are quite compelling, especially for Facsimile 1. However, as we look at the entirety of any of the facsimiles, an Egyptological interpretation does not match what Joseph Smith said about them. That being said, we do not know to what we really should compare the facsimiles. Was Joseph Smith giving us an interpretation 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 was he giving us an interpretation we needed to receive for our spiritual benefit regardless of how any ancient groups would have seen these? We do not know. While I can make a pretty good case for the idea that some Egyptians could have viewed Facsimile 1 the way Joseph Smith presents it, I am 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

Further Reading

- Barney, Kevin L. “The Facsimiles and Semitic Adaptation of Existing Sources.” In *Astronomy, Papyrus, and Covenant*, edited by John Gee and Brian M. Hauglid, 107–30. Provo, Utah: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 2005.
- Gee, John. “A Method for Studying the Facsimiles.” *FARMS Review* 19, no. 1 (2007): 347–53.
- Ostler, Blake T. “Abraham: An Egyptian Connection.” FARMS Report (1981).

about any possible comparisons, or lack thereof.” See Stephen Smoot, “Egyptology and the Book of Abraham: An Interview with Egyptologist Kerry Muhlestein,” FairMormon Blog (November 14, 2013), <https://www.fairmormon.org/blog/2013/11/14/egyptology-and-the-book-of-abraham-an-interview-with-egyptologist-kerry-muhlestein>.